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EMOTION LABOR AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF EAP TEACHERS: AN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

This study explores the emotion labor (EL) and professional identity construction of English for academic purposes (EAP) teachers through the lens of activity theory. The study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing narrative frames and semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tools. Data were collected from ten EAP teachers who completed narrative frames and participated in follow-up semi-structured interviews. Using Lichtman's 3Cs (2014), the two datasets were comparatively coded in light of the components within the activity theory framework. The findings revealed that EAP teachers experience EL arising from the in-class, institutional, and sociocultural parameters of EAP instruction in the Iranian context. Such EL also influenced their identities in personal, interpersonal, and belonging dimensions. The findings shed light on the challenges and strategies employed by EAP teachers in managing their emotions, and how these experiences impact their professional identities.

Key words

emotion labor, English for academic purposes (EAP), professional identity construction, activity theory, EAP content teachers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research on the professionalism of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers has grown extensively (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2023; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021a; Nejadghanbar, Hu, & Mohammadi, 2024; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018; Zhang, 2016). This line of research has linked EAP instruction to the range of professional characteristics and competencies that define EAP membership and performance. As Ding (2019) argued, EAP teaching is now linked to the myriads of institutional, disciplinary, and neoliberal parameters. Knowledge from this developing scholarship is specifically examining how EAP teachers construct their identities and professionalism based on contextual descriptions (Ding, 2019; Ding & Campion, 2016). Recent scholarship has also shown that EAP teaching is not only closely connected to EAP teachers' identities, but it could be accompanied by resonances for teachers' emotions as well (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2023). However, the knowledge base of EAP teachers' emotions is thin and has only recently started to grow.

In response to this gap of knowledge, the present study explored the emotion labor (EL) and professional identity construction of Iranian EAP teachers. EL has roots in the works of Hochschild (1985) and is based on the argument that educational institutions regulate teachers' internal feelings by promoting feeling rules that should be followed by practitioners (e.g., Benesch, 2017; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Gkonou & Miller, 2021). From this perspective, EL is highly compatible with the principles of EAP instruction and EAP teacher identity development, processes that have recurrently been argued to be dependent on external power enactment and governing rules of higher education (see Ding, 2019). However, how such internal-external dynamics shape teachers' emotions and identification processes is open to scrutiny and has little, if any, been examined in previous research. This study aims to fill part of the gap among Iranian EAP teachers whose work has extensively been discussed as imbued with a multitude of emotional and identity challenges such as high workload, lack of voice, lack of recognition, high student expectations, and inappropriate policy enactment (e.g., Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Atai et al., 2022; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021b; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). In seeking this objective, we draw on the theoretical framework of activity theory (AT), which facilitates capturing how system-related particularities shape individuals' (here EAP teachers') sense-making processes and memberships.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teachers' emotion and professional identity construction

According to Feiman-Nemser (2008), effective teaching requires teachers to think, know, feel, and act like a teacher in order to learn how to teach, suggesting that

successful teaching is not only based on content and pedagogical knowledge, but also on emotional interactions that inform the teaching and learning process (Hargreaves, 1998; Kelchtermans, 1996; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Teaching is commonly understood as a profession that is driven by intense interest and commitment (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001). Consequently, teachers often feel motivated and satisfied when they experience positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, fascination, and pride (Hargreaves, 1998). This positive emotional state is crucial, as it contributes to teacher well-being, which Gregersen et al. (2023) describe as "not an extraneous luxury, but a key determinant of good practice" (p. 2). As much as positive emotions can promote good teaching, negative emotions also play a significant role in the emotional landscape of teaching. Recognizing the impact of negative emotions, such as powerlessness, frustration, disappointment, disillusionment, guilt, anger, and fear, is crucial to understanding the full spectrum of teachers' experiences (Kelchtermans, 1996).

The study of emotions and teachers' identity construction (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Nejadghanbar, Song, & Hu, 2024; Yazan & Lindahl, 2022) has been at the center of scholarly attention. Over the years, scholars have investigated the influence of emotions on teachers in and outside their working environments (Hargreaves, 2001; Zembylas, 2005), and some scholars have investigated the impact of emotions in directing teaching within different social contexts (Barkhuizen, 2017; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). The available body of literature shows the interconnected nature of emotions and teachers' identities, fertilizing grounds for an affective turn in applied linguistics (see De Costa et al., 2018; Fairley, 2020).

Previous studies show that there is a relationship between emotions and language teachers' identity construction (Benesch, 2017; Song, 2022; Yazan & Lindahl, 2022; Yazan et al., 2023) and a complex relationship between teachers' emotions and their professional performance (Reis, 2014). This complexity may arise because language teachers' identities and emotional experiences are influenced by factors such as contextual characteristics (Golombek, 1998; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Nazari et al., 2023), as well as sociocultural and educational complexities (Barkhuizen, 2021; Benesch, 2017; Yuan et al., 2022). However, the novelty of the current research lies in investigating EAP teachers' EL within the framework of AT. In this approach, teaching EAP is viewed as an activity system, and the EL of EAP teachers is examined in relation to the various components of AT, as detailed below.

2.2. Theoretical framework: Activity theory

AT was born out of the cultural-historical psychology by Vygotsky and Leont'ev in the 1920s (Verenikina, 2001). Cultural-historical AT is informed by the concept of mediated action by Vygotsky (1978), who, to have a better understanding of the system of human thought, explained that the availability of tools (physical and

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cultural) can mediate our experience and understanding of phenomena, known as mediation (DeVane & Squire, 2012). Vygotsky's idea of mediation, together with the hierarchical structure of human activity by Leont'ev (1978) laid the foundation of the first generation of AT, which defined an activity as a set of actions and the completion of each action can satisfy the motive(s) behind the activity (Leont'ev, 1978). Leont'ev puts an emphasis on the context and the conditions (whether tools are available or not) within which the activity components can be understood and the initial motive can be fulfilled (Karasavvidis, 2009). Since then, a number of scholars have defined an activity as a human action system, and have defined a unit as a meaningful relationship between subjects and objects that can be mediated by available tools (see Choi, 2016).

Later, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was developed by Engeström (1987), combining the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky and Leont'ev (Cole, 1996). Engeström and Middleton (1996) defined an activity system containing certain components, the doer (subject) and the colleagues, conceptual models, tools, and equipment required to carry out the activity, and rules to direct the activity toward a goal. Accordingly, Engeström (1987) added three components to that of Leont'ev (1978) triadic model which is a triangle with subject – tools – object on each angle (Karasavvidis, 2009), turning it into a theoretical tool, in a way to analyze an activity system and determine any inconsistencies, frictions, tensions, and conflicts. Engeström's (1987) model embeds conditions (known as rules) that can influence the reason and the way that a subject does an activity. The next component is known as division of labor, which refers to the allocation of actions to others involved in the work. These two components, rules and division of labor, are effective in forming the community (Verenikina, 2001).

The components of AT can cover different aspects of a classroom, where the subject and the object are the teacher and students (and learning), respectively (Karasavvidis, 2009). Learning is mediated by tools such as textbooks, and other teaching tools as well as instructional approaches. Rules can cover every regulation ranging from national, institutional, and classroom rules. Stakeholders (students, teachers, colleagues, administration, and parents) fall under the category of community, and finally the category of "Division of labor" determines the load and mode of work shared among individuals, sections, and mediating artifacts (Karasavvidis, 2009). Therefore, AT helps researchers make a better sense of analyzing technical and social settings to investigate the dialectic relationship between subject and object, learning and doing individually or collectively (Crawford & Hasan, 2006).

2.3. Previous studies in the context of Iran

To date, there has been a good number of research about EAP courses in the context of Iran. For example, Soodmand Afshar and Movassagh (2016) highlighted the

divergent perceptions of stakeholders regarding the needs of EAP students, which was found to be reading comprehension as the primary area of need. Their study found concerns about the sources, materials, English proficiency level, class duration, and timing, as well as the motivation of both students and teachers. Gooniband Shooshtari et al. (2023) highlighted the dynamic nature of EAP instruction, emphasizing the value of educators engaging with contemporary interdisciplinary approaches to foster student engagement in their tasks. Their study also underscored the importance of aligning teaching practices with institutional norms and enhancing students' skills, advocating for the provision of relevant and accessible resources to support student learning. Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018) found that the dissatisfaction among stakeholders regarding various aspects of EAP education is rooted in educational, political, sociocultural, and ethno-religious factors. Atai et al. (2022) explored the identity formation of a novice Iranian EAP teacher, employing a range of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, classroom observations, and stimulated recall sessions. Their research revealed three central themes in the novice teacher's identity development: the interplay between self-perceived and developed EAP identities, emotional challenges associated with content, and the perceived under-recognition of EAP teachers' professional status. Additionally, they discovered that the teacher's identity was shaped by a variety of conceptual, emotional, and agency-related conflicts, all of which were influenced by the specific context of EAP instruction in Iran.

Despite this growth of attention to the emotion and identity construction of language teachers, research on EAP teachers' emotions and identities has only recently started to grow. Missing in this line of inquiry is adopting theoretical frameworks that effectively help with conceptualizing the emotional fluctuations and identification processes of EAP teachers, especially in the Iranian context, which is laden with excessive emotion and identity challenges (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021b; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Such contextual parameters are likely to create tensions between teachers' internal feelings and the expectations that they are supposed to fulfil, i.e., EL (see Atai et al., 2022; Benesch, 2017; Gkonou & Miller, 2021). Thus, EL is conceptually resonant with the emotional and identity tensions that Iranian EAP teachers are likely to experience. Yet, little is known about the outreach of such tensions and how they influence EAP teachers' identities. To bridge this knowledge gap, the present study explored EL and identity construction among Iranian EAP teachers by addressing the following questions:

1. How does institutional work (including interpersonal, institutional, and sociocultural expectations) contribute to EAP practitioners' emotion labor?

2. How does the EAP practitioners' emotion labor shape their professional identity construction?

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Researcher positionality

Considering the significance of the researcher's role in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013), the positionality of the researcher reserves a key status in understanding "how biography, place and the positioning of self and other shape the research process" (Corlett & Mavin, 2018, p. 22). The researchers in this study, being experienced EAP teachers themselves, are well-acquainted with the context and are therefore better equipped to interpret the findings in relation to the emotions and needs of EAP teachers in Iran. The major motivation for conducting this research is to study the lived experiences of EAP teachers, investigate the impact of institutional work on their EL, and explore how these experiences influence their identity construction.

3.2. Context and participants

In the Iranian higher education, universities require students to pass EAP courses. These courses are often taught by EAP teachers who are either content experts or language experts. Content teachers possess extensive knowledge in their respective subjects but often lack comprehensive training and expertise in English language teaching methodologies and linguistics. Conversely, language teachers are well-versed in language teaching techniques and possess a heightened linguistic awareness, yet they may not have an adequate grasp of the subject matter. The distinct educational backgrounds of these two groups of teachers lead to a variety of challenges within the EAP classroom setting (see Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017).

Unlike General English classes in private institutes in the context of Iran, where teachers seem to be more autonomous in bringing novelty and up-to-date materials and pedagogical approaches, universities hold a more traditional attitude toward the system of education and assessment; for example, classes are often teacher-fronted, based on form-focused instruction (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009) with little attention to students' interests and needs (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). As for teachers and teaching, the head of the faculty usually adopts a top-down approach in decision-making and leadership (Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016), meaning that the courses are assigned by the head of the department and teachers have minimum freedom in their choices (the rules component of AT). Universities usually have different faculties each offering a specific field of study. Content teachers are normally selected among the faculty members within the department while language teachers are invited from the department of foreign languages and literature. Therefore, language teachers are not considered to be a member of the faculty, but they are often known as invited lecturers. Each faculty offers

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undergraduate and post-graduate courses (community). In line with Atai et al. (2022), in this study, the community is operationalized as institutional and extra-institutional factors influencing teachers' emotions and identity constructions.

Teachers, while working within higher educational institutes, should maintain their professional interaction with both faculty members (colleagues and the head of the department) and students who can contribute to teachers' emotion management (division of labor). When it comes to any special knowledge other than ELT methodology and linguistics, and in addition to other available resources on the Internet, the faculty members are considered to be experts in their field, therefore they can be the main source of consultation and assistance for teachers (tools). Whether each teacher might have a clear and different purpose (goal) for seeking assistance or support to manage their emotions is a matter of investigation that will be revealed in the findings section.

In line with the purpose of this study, a total number of 10 participants (subjects), all language teachers with experience of teaching EAP courses, were recruited from the higher education universities in the context of Iran. The participants were reached and contacted through snowball sampling. We chose snowball sampling for several reasons. First, it was difficult to locate the target participants in one setting, and snowball sampling provided us with the opportunity to identify language teachers from different educational capacities across the country (Ary et al., 2010). Another contributing factor is that language instructors often serve as part-time lecturers at universities, which limits their availability. The first two language teachers were asked to encourage and introduce their fellow colleagues to participate in our study. In the same way, the new participants were asked to find other participants, which resulted in a total number of 10 participants across different higher educational institutions in Iran.

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No.	Gender	Age	Work Experience (years)	Other Training Qualification	Degree
T1	Male	30	1	-	PhD in applied linguistics
T2	Female	44	5	TTC[1]	PhD in applied linguistics
T3	Female	30	1	-	PhD student of applied linguistics
T4	Female	44	8		PhD in applied linguistics
T5	Male	30	1	TTC/TKT[2]	Master's in applied linguistics
T6	Male	59	25	-	PhD in literature and English studies
T7	Female	44	18	-	PhD in applied linguistics
T8	Male	41	2	-	Master's in applied linguistics
T9	Female	45	12	TTC	PhD in applied linguistics
T10	Male	34	2	-	PhD in applied linguistics

Table 1. The demographic information of the participants

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[1] Teacher Training Course.
[2] Teaching Knowledge Test.

The study was predicated on the notion that language teachers, due to a deficiency in content knowledge of EAP courses and various external influences, would experience EL. The EL experiences, can be triggered by interactions with students, colleagues, and the departments (Benesch & Prior, 2023; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). As emotion and identity are interrelated, we aimed to investigate how the identity of English language teachers is influenced by their experiences in teaching EAP courses. The demographic information of the participants is demonstrated in Table 1 above.

3.3. Design and data collection

This study adopted a narrative approach to collect the experiences of the participants. Since we are dealing with the lived experiences of EAP teachers, the narrative approach suits the scope of the study well as it can enable researchers to probe into teachers' emotional lives and identity experiences (Barkhuizen, 2016). The data collection process was conducted in two distinct stages. Initially, the first stage provided participants with a narrative frame to fill out, which served as a structured template for capturing their stories. Subsequently, the second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews that allowed for a deeper and more nuanced exploration of the information gathered from the narrative frameworks. These observations were made in light of the AT perspective of the study in unpacking how EL features in the EAP teachers' work and how it influences their professional identity construction.

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3.3.1. Narrative frames

Emotions are difficult and complicated to describe (Zembylas, 2005) and this complexity can be tied to numerous personal and professional factors (Schutz et al., 2006). In this study, we utilized narrative frames to facilitate the process for teachers in describing their EL (see Atai et al., 2022). On the other hand, narrative frames could give teachers some time to reflect on their emotional experiences (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). The narrative frames used in this study were designed to capture what part of teaching EAP classes could contribute to teachers' EL and identity construction. Teachers were given the narrative frames (one frame per teacher), and they were given a week to return the frame either via email or in person. The narrative frames were designed according to AT requiring teachers to reflect on one of their emotional challenges while teaching EAP courses, the reason for their experience, the strategies they adopted to manage their emotions at the time, and the implications for their identity.

3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

After collecting and reviewing the narrative frames, the researchers arranged semi-structured interviews with each participant to further elaborate on the experiences shared in the narratives. Semi-structured interviews helped us to uncover various institutional factors influencing teachers' EL and identities. The theoretical underpinning for this approach was based on the argument that "educational institutions regulate teachers' behaviour and emotions through top-down policies teachers are expected to enforce" (Benesch, 2020, p. 6). Therefore, the main and leading interview questions were: 1) How teachers evaluate themselves and their emotions as EAP practitioners in the context of Iran (subjects), 2) how they manage their emotions (tools), 3) the rationale and the purpose of their emotion management strategies (goals), 4) what institutional policies affect their emotion management (rules), 5) the role of institutional and extra-institutional factors in influencing teachers' EL (community), and 6) how different stakeholders (students, colleagues, supervisors) can mediate teachers' emotion management (division of labor).

After narrative frames were collected, arrangements were made to schedule interviews at times convenient for the participants. Some participants preferred to have an online interview (*N* = 7), while others (*N* = 3) preferred to have a face-to-face interview. Semi-structured interviews were used to seek more details from the participants' responses to their narrative frames. Consequently, while the core interview questions maintained a consistent structure, supplementary questions were tailored slightly for each teacher. This customization facilitated a more thorough investigation into the unique experiences of the teachers. For both narrative frames and interviews, participants were given the choice of language for their convenience. Three out of 10 participants chose Farsi and the rest chose English. Narrative frames and interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim for later data analysis. The transcription and translation of the data were carried out by the second researcher and subsequently reviewed for accuracy by the other two researchers. Once consensus was reached regarding the accuracy of the transcriptions and translations, the data analysis phase started.

3.4. Data analysis

To triangulate our data, it was necessary to first code each dataset interrogatively and then conduct a comparative coding on both datasets. We borrowed Lichtman's (2014) three Cs of qualitative analysis (codes, categories, and concepts) to make a constant comparison of our data. Lichtman's qualitative analysis provides a comprehensive step-by-step approach that enabled us to gain a nuanced understanding of EAP teachers' EL and identity construction through the lens of AT.

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Our analysis comprised several steps. We began by reading the data multiple times, which allowed us to develop an initial familiarity and understanding of their contents. Then, each dataset was coded separately considering the corresponding components of AT. For example, the data related to the EL regarding institutional policy and institutional obligations were labelled as "rules" component from AT framework. Similar coding and cross-referencing were applied to each data source until the extracted codes became rich enough to be compared and refined integratively to delineate categories. For the sake of accuracy, the researchers of the study had to have a thorough and constant discussion over the emerging categories to reach a final agreement. For example, when some codes from the narrative frames and some codes from the interview scripts were related to the EL that teachers reported to have experienced in the class, these codes fell under the major theme of "in-class emotion labor".

Once the categories from the two data sets were developed and compared to one another, those concepts pertaining to language teachers' EL and identity construction in relation to the AT framework were generated. Three major concepts emerged from the analysis labelled as: in-class emotion labor, in-corridor emotion labor, and contextual and cultural emotion labor.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. In-class emotion labor

One of the most common experiences of emotional struggles was the clash between teachers' professional identities and the roles that they were expected to adopt inside the classroom in response to students' expectations, needs, and assigned materials. The analysis of data revealed that teachers often faced EL due to insufficient content knowledge (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T8, T9, T10) and conflicting expectations from students (T2, T4, T5, T7, T8). They primarily experienced EL when they perceived vulnerability due to a lack of deep mastery over course content, which in turn led to an undeserved sense of appreciation from students. They also experienced stress and a loss of confidence when constantly being evaluated by students regarding content-related questions:

> *"I usually have stress before an EAP class because some students expect me to be well-versed in content. This makes me feel stressed, I always try to hide my feeling of stress during EAP class. It's not easy to convince my students not to expect me to be a content expert."* (T9, Interview).

The discrepancy between the backgrounds of EAP teachers and those of their students led to a mismatch between what students expected and what teachers thought they needed. This disparity put teachers in a vulnerable position:

> *"I always look at language learning as a skill to be used, while they [students] treated it like any other academic subject that needed to be studied, not practiced. For example, they were deeply concerned about the details and the exact meaning of the articles, but my main focus was on their reading comprehension."* (T5, Interview).

In response to these expectations, teachers employed various strategies to effectively manage their classrooms. Two main strategies adopted by the teachers were interpersonal strategies and leveraging personal assets. Interpersonal strategies, employed by six teachers, were aimed at enhancing classroom management amidst conflicting expectations and unsuitable materials. These strategies included building a friendly rapport with students, negotiating compromises, creating reciprocal agreements, and delegating responsibilities to students. For instance, T2 sought to establish a congenial atmosphere by exercising patience and exploring alternative ways to conduct the class, such as *"Being patient and provocative enough to find an appropriate way to manage the class, for instance, not insisting on continuing the class in a strictly formal or rigid manner."* (T2, Narrative Frame). Meanwhile, T5 adopted a mentorship role, emphasizing the importance of practice and continuous improvement: *"I tried to clarify that learning a language is a gradual process, and a language can be learned by consistent practice. I tried to convince them that language learning does not happen overnight or in a single session."* (T5, Narrative Frame).

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Leveraging personal assets involved managing emotions, expanding content knowledge, and relying on English language teaching knowledge. T1 stressed the importance of remaining calm in the classroom as negative emotions could negatively impact teaching and learning: *"My imaginations about the consequences encourage me to remain calm and decide wisely to avoid complications. The classroom environment should be peaceful, without any anger, stress, or negativity in the class. I try to make a suitable environment for teaching and learning by staying calm and relaxed. We can agree that positive vibes are necessary for educational success."* (T1, Interview). T9 shifted her approach from hiding emotions to expanding her content knowledge, recognizing that increased expertise was crucial for effective emotion management: *"I felt that I had to keep my feelings hidden. I thought if the students had noticed, it could have disrupted the class. Hiding my emotions and feelings was a quick, and of course, a temporary solution to maintain order. Afterward, I tried to focus on improving my knowledge of the content."* (T9, Interview).

4.2. In-corridor emotion labor

In addition to the environment of classroom, teachers also experienced EL in the faculty from three sources: an atmosphere of condescension, unfamiliarity with the environment, and the need to maintain professionalism in the eyes of others. Teachers (T10, T2, T5, T7, T9) expressed feeling patronized within the staffroom environment. For instance, T10 noted that content teachers often felt more competent in teaching EAP courses, despite lacking adequate language teaching knowledge: *"Content teachers tend to believe that their knowledge in their field, like mechanics, makes them more qualified to teach EAP than an English teacher with no background in Mechanics."* (T10, Interview). Additionally, T2 mentioned feeling demotivated due to a lack of adequate support from the head of the department: *"Well, when I see that no one cares as much, … within the department, no one for sure knows what the teachers are doing in their classes, it means in any way that I handle my class, no one cares! […] when there is no supervision on our work, it makes me really hopeless and disappointed, and maybe all these efforts would turn into a negative feeling."* (T2, Interview).

Furthermore, feeling like an outsider and lacking authority were common experiences, as highlighted by T5, who described discomfort in teaching outside their department: *"You see, the classes were held outside the department, at the department of engineers. Teachers might feel more comfortable when they are in a familiar environment like their own departments or within their faculty. And for me, having to go to another place was really uncomfortable. It made me feel like an outsider."* (T5, Interview).

Considering the last source of EL, teachers felt the pressure to maintain their professional reputation and self-image among their colleagues. T5 acknowledged refraining from sharing their emotional struggles, fearing it would negatively impact their perceived competence: *"When the head of the English department invited me to teach the course, I could not reject it. I did not want to disappoint him, and this made me refrain from complaining later about the hardship of the course and my feelings."* (T5, Interview). Similarly, T9 chose to hide her emotions to protect her professional reputation: *"If the administration would understand my feelings, it would affect my professional reputation and competence negatively."* (T9, Interview).

The adopted identities as the result of strategies employed by teachers to manage in-corridor EL can be categorized into three key identities: the personally invested professional, the reflective practitioner grappling with complex self-perceptions, and the ethically grounded teacher. The personally invested professional was adopted by teachers such as T2, T3, T4, and T10 who prioritized their main responsibility of teaching over the concerns of the staffroom. They viewed their role as an opportunity for personal growth and development, constantly striving to improve their skills and abilities. For example, T10 reflected on the importance of focusing on their primary objectives and not wasting energy on aspects that are not worth their time: *"I realized I was only looking for an*

experience, which I could gain in the class, not in the staff room, where I feel a bit of tension.” (T10, Interview). The reflective practitioner grappling with complex self-perceptions emerged in response to staff-imposed EL. Some teachers developed self-confidence, believing that their expertise in EAP methodologies gave them an advantage over content teachers who lacked sufficient language teaching knowledge: *“A language teacher has studied the methodology of the EAP courses, and he is equipped with a special method and special approach to teaching the course.”* (T10, Interview). They embraced their role as agents supporting the importance of ELT as a field of study: *“If I say that I can do many things in my major that can be considered as important as other majors, for example, medicine, I must show it and have the best possible outcome … Each major and expertise is valuable for itself, and no major or expertise can replace another one.”* (T2, Interview).

The EL imposed by expectations from supervisors and department heads led teachers to adopt an ethically grounded teacher identity. They set boundaries for themselves and were committed to accepting EAP courses only when they felt prepared to face the challenges. This ethical-professional identity allowed them to prioritize their own values and maintain their professional reputation: *“If the head of the department asks me to teach EAP again, I would consider saying no. I should first think if I want/can face the challenges or not.”* (T4, Interview). T9 explained: *“Although I really like teaching new subjects, I believe I should not teach any other specific-field courses unless I am trained well for handling the challenges ahead.”* (T9, Interview).

4.3. Contextual and cultural emotion labor

In addition to the classroom and corridor, the analysis of teachers’ responses revealed that they experienced EL that was contextually and culturally caused. The main sources of EL for the teachers were educational hurdles (T2, T3, T4, T5, T8, T9) and perceived unfairness in education (T2, T5, T8, T9, T10). Educational hurdles encompassed challenges within the educational system in Iran, including systemic misalignment and methodological conflicts between EAP approaches and the national educational system. One major challenge was the shortage of EAP teachers and the process of assigning ELT teachers to EAP courses. This process often undervalued the teachers, making them feel like secondary-level teachers: *“In some faculties, the EAP courses are assigned to content teachers active within the faculty, or if no one takes the course, or no one likes to take the course, they will assign the course to an ELT teacher.”* (T10, Interview). The scarcity of suitable EAP resources in the market, coupled with the disparity in English proficiency levels among students and between the materials and the students, were also recognized as significant challenges: *“A mismatch between the students’ proficiency levels and the course requirements can significantly constrain the flexibility of one’s teaching approach … We lack well-developed materials for teaching. As a teacher, you should feel that the*

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subject/content is worth teaching … Effective strategies or techniques for managing such courses more efficiently are lacking. Additionally, the absence of specialized teacher education for EAP instructors contributes to this issue." (T4, Interview).

Perceived unfairness in education included the diversity in students' varied educational backgrounds, social biases, perceptions, and stereotypes, as well as teachers' well-being and equity, including their socioeconomic status:

> *"Students' opinions of their current teacher can be influenced by their previous teachers. I mean, they often compare their teachers to the past ones, as their past experiences shape their expectations. Therefore, if I use the type of interactive activities that I had used in my General English classes in EAP classes, EAP students might not like it or they might resist it."* (T5, Interview).

Teachers voiced concerns about the educational system in Iran, noting that it places considerable emphasis on obtaining degrees while not adequately prioritizing the implementation of quality education. They also mentioned financial aspects and the lack of opportunities as factors that could push them to take EAP courses unwillingly:

> *"Financial considerations impact my decisions. Teachers' low salaries, particularly for those married and facing life expenses, may compel them to accept teaching any class, even outside their expertise. Experience is another factor; new teachers seek opportunities to enhance their CVs, gain experience, and increase income. These motivations can lead teachers to take on any classes, including EAP courses."* (T5, Interview).

Such experiences had implications for the construction of teachers' identities, specifically in terms of an empowered teacher for personal growth and a challenged teacher. The concept of an empowered teacher for personal growth centers on the idea of EAP teachers striving to become self-reliant, adaptable, and versatile in various aspects of their profession. T3 viewed EAP courses as an opportunity for personal growth and improvement: *"At first it made me frustrated, but after some time, I made a plan to gain more information and knowledge and overcame my shortcomings. I reminded myself that it could be an opportunity to learn."* (T3, Interview). T4 suggested that every class and course can serve as a learning opportunity for teachers to gain experience and apply what they have learned: *"For an English teacher, every opportunity, every course can give you more experience, and implement learned experiences."* (T4, Interview). On the other hand, the idea of a challenged teacher refers to the experience of feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable, which could have an impact on EAP teachers' identity. T5, for example, expressed a sense of burden and dissatisfaction with teaching EAP courses, highlighting the challenges and difficulties faced in terms of content preparation and a lack of personal interest in the course materials: *"I consider myself as a General English teacher, rather than an EAP one. I did not have a positive experience with EAP courses. One problem for me was preparing for EAP lessons which were time-consuming.*

Another problem was that I did not like the textbook I was required to use." (T5, Narrative Frame).

5. DISCUSSION

As the data presented above show, the EAP teachers in Iran experienced EL at different levels including classroom, institutional, and sociocultural levels, which in turn influenced their identities as EAP professionals within the activity system of their professional work. At the in-class level, the teachers were struck by the EL as arising from students' expectations and lack of recognition for their authority, which aligns with the previous scholarship adopting an AT perspective in exploring teacher identity construction (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). Previous research has shown that EAP teachers may experience severe identity tensions (see Ding, 2019) and emotional challenges (e.g., Nazari et al., 2023; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018) due to student-related expectations. However, such EL bore clear implications for the teachers' identity construction in that they felt less powerful in the face of challenges, which is contrary to previous research suggesting that after teaching EAP courses, language teachers can feel more responsible for students' progress and more professional regarding students' development (Martin, 2014, as cited in Li & Wang, 2018). This condition seems to result from the policies adopted in recruiting EAP teachers in the Iranian context. In corroboration with the previous studies (e.g., Kaivanpanah et al., 2021a; Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016), the findings of this study show that improper decisions to recruit EAP teachers without evidence-based teacher education are likely to pose emotional challenges on them. More specifically, such challenges are likely to negatively influence the identities that teachers construct as professionals, a point that has been extensively underlined in the literature of teacher professional identity construction (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Yazan & Lindahl, 2022). Thus, the findings add to the literature by empirically grounding the unfitting policies that result in EL and identity tensions for EAP teachers.

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At the corridor level, the teachers' EL arose from power dynamics with content teachers and lack of effective preparation for EAP instruction. Atai et al. (2023) have reported how content teachers see themselves as superior to EAP teachers with an ELT background, a point that has been emphasized in the other relevant literature as well (e.g., Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021a; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Karimi and Mofidi (2019) also state that the participants within teachers' activity system membership play a key role in their institutional identity construction. Interestingly, the lack of adequate preparation for EAP instruction significantly influenced the teachers' identities, intertwining with their ethical grounding and complex self-perceptions as individuals. That is, excessive EL motivated the teachers to overlook such lack of preparation and adhere to their personalized sense-making processes despite the extra emotional investment that they had to make in their job. This finding adds novel contributions to the literature

by unpacking how teachers become so (de)motivated that they prefer to dispose of hope in institutional changes and strive to draw on their personal potentials in tackling problems. This finding aligns well with the AT perspective of this study, demonstrating that system-related factors can motivate individuals to make decisions that either resist or accept the existing rules.

At the macro-structural level, the teachers' EL had a sociocultural coloring. That is, the teachers' EL was defined by policy-related decisions and fairness-invoked issues that became a source of EL for the teachers. Macro-level, cultural particularities have persistently been mentioned as a major source of emotional challenges for teachers (e.g., Ding, 2019; Ding & Campion, 2016), their identity construction (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Yazan & Lindahl, 2022), especially in the Iranian context (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018), and more noticeably within the AT framework (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). However, for the teachers in this study, these sociocultural particularities placed them in a challenging and vulnerable position. These new dimensions of working in EAP align closely with Ding's (2019) argument about the impact of neoliberal and neonational policies on the professional identity development of EAP teachers. In this regard, the issue of fairness emerges as a crucial aspect of their professional identity development, particularly affecting ELT-credentialized teachers, as evidenced by the experiences of the teachers in this study. This issue could be a working agendum for future research in focally examining fairness and identity construction among EAP teachers.

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6. CONCLUSION

In sum, the findings of this study show that EAP teachers may experience EL as arising from various factors at the classroom, institutional, and sociocultural levels which come to reshape the teachers' identities within the activity system of higher education. The findings show that experiencing EL is not just a personally-driven process. Rather, it is highly defined by the way teachers define their professionalism, professional work, and professional identities relative to the myriad of surrounding factors existing within the activity system of the work. These findings provide novel contributions for teacher educators in under-represented settings like Iran. Although the EL we portrayed in this study is focused on Iranian EAP teachers, they are likely to happen to teachers in other settings where teachers are entangled in the internal-external grip. Thus, offering specialized teacher education for EAP teachers with an ELT background can facilitate a smooth transition and help them become familiar with institutional policies. Such courses could cover various dimensions, including working with content-related materials and developing collaborative skills with content teachers.

The present study had limitations that should be covered in future research. First, the study involved only 10 teachers and the issues of emotion and identity warrant investigation with a larger sample size. Second, we did not employ

observational protocols, such as classroom observations, which could provide valuable insights into how EAP teachers navigate in-class emotional dynamics and identification processes. Third, a longitudinal examination of EAP teachers' emotions and identities could reveal how these aspects develop over time and in response to various internal and external changes. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study can help teachers and teacher educators create a more emotionally-safe environment, thereby facilitating better identity construction.

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