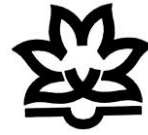




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*Iranian Journal  
of  
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

## English as a Foreign Language Teacher Immunity: An Integrated Reflective Practice

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explored the development of language teacher immunity among Iranian in-service English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL) teachers (N=15) working at public high schools. Drawing on semi-structured interview data, the study found that low self-confidence, students' demotivation, low income, limited facilities, lack of enough time to teach English, parental expectations, and negative attitudes toward English were the main triggers of language teacher immunity among the participants. Reflecting on those disturbances, the participants employed certain coping strategies such as prior preparation, establishing a good rapport with learners, and exercising agency in providing required facilities and negotiating objectives with learners' parents. The strategies adopted by the participants revealed that reflective practice should be an integrated undertaking involving reflection on personal, sociocultural, and educational factors rather than being limited to practice per se. The study introduced *imposed maladaptive immunity* as a transitional stage from exercising agency to setting into a state of complete indifference due to lack of support from macro-level educational policy makers. Finally, the study implied that language teacher education programs should raise EFL teachers' awareness of the developmental stages of language teacher immunity as an integrated reflective practice.

**Keywords:** language teacher immunity; reflective practice; EFL teacher; language teacher attrition; maladaptive immunity; productive immunity; self-organization

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

**Received:** 15 June 2019

**Revised version received:** 2 Sept. 2019

**Accepted:** 12 Sept. 2019

**Available online:** 1 Oct. 2019

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## Introduction

Teacher attrition, as a serious problem in educational systems worldwide, has recently garnered the attention of educational experts and practitioners alike. Morrison (2013), for instance, reports that around 25-45 percent of teachers quit their job in the first three years of experience in teaching. English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL) teaching is believed to be no exception and the average time EFL teachers remain in their profession is likened to the career length of athletes in professional sports in which the physical demands and injuries exert a great deal of pressure on the sportspersons (Farrell, 2016). Examples of stress-inducing factors in language education contexts include pressure from various sources, restricted autonomy, concerns over increasing professional knowledge and skills (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017), accountability for predetermined targets (Crookes, 2013), anxiety caused by low linguistic proficiency despite being pedagogically confident, poor working conditions such as low wages and limited resources (Gao & Xu, 2014; Rahmati, Sadeghi, & Ghaderi, 2018), and even dealing with troubles of students' personal lives (Kelchtermans, 2011). Regardless of the causes, language teacher attrition has detrimental effects on learners, teachers, and institutions and results in personal and organizational costs.

Thus, researchers are seriously concerned with identifying those strategies that make the difference between those EFL teachers who maintain instructional effectiveness in the face of all professional stressors and those who surrender and set in indifference. Most relevant studies (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017, 2019; Farrell, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019) identify reflective practice as the key to teacher survival. More specifically, Farrell (2016) has proposed a holistic framework for reflection which is composed of five levels/stages including “*philosophy of practice, principles of practice, theory of practice, practice, and beyond practice*” (p. 106). In this model, *philosophy* represents a form of self-knowledge derived from EFL teachers' reflection on their own personal values as well as ethnic, socioeconomic, and family backgrounds. *Principles* manifest themselves in an EFL teacher's teaching style and the willingness to change that style while *theory* pertains to reflection on critical incidents or anomalies caused by the discrepancy between a teacher's conceptualization of practice and actual classroom experience. The locus of reflective practice at these three levels is on the covert foci of teaching which emphasize what Farrell (2016) calls the “hidden aspect” of teaching or the invisible part of the iceberg which is beneath water (p. 103). The fourth level of the model attends to reflection on actual classroom *practice*, which is by far the focus of most studies on reflective practice while it is only the top “10 per cent” of the iceberg (Farrell, 2016, p. 103). The value of Farrell's holistic reflective framework, however, lies in its fifth level which concerns issues *beyond practice*. Farrell (2016, p. 104) calls this level as “critical reflection” which entails an exploration of socio-political factors “that impact a teacher's practice both inside and outside the classroom”. To extend the iceberg metaphor, the present authors believe that the *beyond practice* aspect of reflective practice represents an examination of the whole iceberg and the surrounding waters which assists EFL teachers in navigating their way around troubled oceans. Recent developments in language teaching have embraced the value of such a holistic approach to reflection which integrates personal, interpersonal, sociocultural, and contextual aspects of teaching. One such latest development is the introduction of the concept of ‘language teacher immunity’ to language education in a series of studies by Hiver (2015, 2017) and Hiver and Dörnyei (2017).

## Conceptualizing Language Teacher Immunity

Language teacher immunity is a recent metaphor borrowed from the field of medicine to describe the protective armor developed by language teachers to buffer the adverse effects of contextual constraints and professional tensions. Similar to biological immunity, which protects human body against the debilitating effects of germs and pathogens of the external environment, language

teacher immunity serves as a defense mechanism against professional stressors and assists language teachers to survive and remain in the profession while maintaining their “professional equilibrium and instructional effectiveness” (Hiver, 2017, pp. 669-670). Language teacher immunity is characterized by specificity (the ability to gear a particular coping strategy to a specific disturbance), memory (drawing on past experiences of overcoming a tension in dealing with present and future threats), adaptability (the ability to adjust constructively in response to changes), and durability (becoming part of the language teacher identity).

However, language teacher immunity does not always develop into a positive form. As biological immunity may endanger the survival of an organ by showing hyperactive responses in the form of allergies to harmless foreign particles or autoimmune reactions by rejecting curative materials, language teacher immunity can develop into a maladaptive form, which is characterized by avoiding risk and innovation (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017). To extend the metaphor, maladaptive immunity can be likened to using chemotherapy to eliminate cancerous cells which results in the destruction of non-cancerous cells as well. Thus, maladaptive language teacher immunity can hinder professional development and lead to conservatism, fossilization, cynicism, rigidity, and apathy (Hiver, 2015, 2017; Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017). The distinction between maladaptive and productive language teacher immunity can be summarized in resistance to change, in the former, as opposed to openness to change, in the latter. Moreover, as Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) caution, “One preeminent danger of maladaptive immunity is its stealth” (p. 417) and the fact that most language teachers are unaware of its development.

The emergence of language teacher immunity is examined through the lens of self-organization, which is one of the main principles of Complexity Theory (CT). Self-organization is an adaptive process in which the internal structure and/or function of a system changes in response to external environments to guarantee survival. The process of self-organization takes place through the four developmental stages of triggering, coupling, realignment, and stabilization. In the stage of triggering, a destabilizing event or a *perturbation* (in CT terms) disturbs the system's equilibrium and serves as a factor for change (Hiver, 2015; Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017). Instability triggered by a perturbation is a necessary condition for self-organization without which the system is set into a state of excessive stability, or fossilization. A caveat to this argument, however, is that the relationship between the size of a perturbation and the level of change is not a linear one. That is, a small trigger may result in unpredictable outcomes while a huge force may simply skip notice and have little influence (Kra, 2009; Straussfogel & Von Schilling, 2009).

In the coupling or linking stage, a system develops coping mechanisms to deal with specific perturbations in an attempt to turn disturbances to its advantage. For instance, an EFL teacher may decide to establish a good rapport with learners in order to control their misbehavior or get in touch through social networking services with those students who need remedial practice so as to manage class time efficiently. Thus, coupling assists EFL teachers to synchronize with contextual conditions and return back to professional efficacy. The formation of language teacher immunity, which is triggered by a perturbation in the first stage, moves toward specificity in terms of establishing relationships between particular disturbances and specific coping strategies in the coupling stage. In the realignment phase, the system returns back to productivity and new patterns emerge in the system's behavior. Since the system is now different from its past, it is technically described in CT terms as experiencing a *major phase change* (Goldstein, 2011). Finally, the new pattern becomes part of the system's behavior and stabilizes in the system in the stabilization stage. In EFL field, the emergent specific disturbance-response relationships become part of the language teacher professional identity. Language teacher immunity at this stage takes either a productive or a maladaptive form and directs EFL teachers' behavior.

## Empirical Background

Intrigued with the question of what distinguished thriving EFL teachers from those who either survived through endless struggle or quit the profession altogether, Hiver (2015) carried out an exploratory case study among Korean EFL teachers. He conducted four 90-minute semi-structured individual interviews with four English language teachers from pre-tertiary (both public and private), and tertiary sectors. The results revealed that discouraging evaluations (e.g., *I didn't learn anything in class this semester*) and the rejection of teacher initiatives triggered vulnerability and instability among the participants. To cope with the resulting disturbances, the teachers tried to make sense of what they experienced and continuously modified their reactions in response to contextual tension. The participants believed that the residue of this experience formed part of their teacher identity, which helped them feel less vulnerable in their future exposure to environmental disturbances. Hiver (2015) termed the outcome of this developmental process as "teacher immunity" (p. 225), which served as the key to remaining committed to the profession in its productive form while leading to demotivation in its maladaptive configuration. Although the study relied on a small number of participants and overlooked contextual variations among public, private, and tertiary sectors, it introduced language teacher immunity as a new aspect of EFL teacher identity, outlined its formation within the developmental stages of self-organization, and identified its two main configurations.

Hiver (2017) further explored the typical outcomes of language teacher immunity and the developmental processes leading to those archetypes using a retrodictive qualitative modeling approach (Chan, Dörnyei, & Henry, 2015; Dörnyei, 2014). Data collection began with four focus group interviews with 44 language teachers and teacher educators. The participants were involved in a social categorization process (Turner & Reynolds, 2012) by listing EFL teachers who were able to function effectively despite difficulties and describing their characters in terms of what those teachers thought, felt, believed, did, and wanted. The analysis of focus group data led to the identification of language teacher immunity archetypes with the seven constructs of *teaching self-efficacy, attitudes to teaching, coping, classroom affectivity, burnout, resilience, and openness to change* in common. A 39-item questionnaire, including 5-7 items on each of these seven constructs was, subsequently, developed and administered to 293 Korean EFL teachers. Cluster analysis of the questionnaire data resulted in the identification of some archetypes. Finally, three representative respondents from each cluster were invited to take part in in-depth life story interviews. The results of both qualitative and quantitative data analyses revealed four global categories including productively immunized, maladaptively immunized (fossilized), immunocompromised (overcompensators who excessively craved for change), and halfway immunized (who adopted a pessimistic attitude toward EFL profession and change). Students' misbehavior, lack of time, and lack of cooperation on the part of the learners were the main triggers of EFL teachers' instability. Positively immunized teachers tried to accept problems and change their routines to cope with them while maladaptively immunized EFL teachers remained indifferent. Overcompensators, on the other hand, blamed themselves for contradictions with the effect of amplifying their destabilizing function. Considering the significant role of language teacher immunity in EFL teachers' identity formation, emotional well-being, and instructional effectiveness, Hiver (2017) suggested that teacher education programs raise EFL teachers' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

The present qualitative study, as part of a larger mixed-methods research project on the dynamic interplay of language teacher immunity, vision, and motivation (Rahmati, 2018), aimed at investigating how going through the developmental stages of language teacher immunity as an integrated reflective practice influenced EFL teachers' instructional effectiveness and professional development. The word 'integrated' here entails that language teacher immunity is a reflective practice which equally emphasizes reflection on personal, social, and contextual factors rather than being specifically focused on practice, which is implied even in those models of reflective

practice that include a *beyond practice* level. The specific objectives of the study were to examine the triggers of language teacher immunity in the Iranian state sector language education context, the coping strategies adopted by the Iranian EFL teachers to deal with those triggers, developmental stages of the formation of Iranian EFL teachers' immunity, and Iranian EFL teachers' voice in the most effective manipulation strategies of language teacher immunity. Taking account of EFL teachers' often neglected voice in their own emotional and professional development by providing them with the opportunity to express their views on the most effective strategies to steer the formation of language teacher immunity toward a productive, rather than a maladaptive, form was an innovative aspect of the current study. This innovative feature would, hopefully, lead to gaining a better understanding of EFL teachers' reflective practices and coping mechanisms. Thus, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the triggering disturbances of language teacher immunity in the Iranian EFL context?
2. What are the coupling strategies adopted by Iranian EFL teachers to deal with the triggering disturbances of language teacher immunity?
3. What developmental stages do Iranian EFL teachers go through during the formation of language teacher immunity?
4. What are the most effective strategies from the Iranian EFL teachers' perspective to positively influence the development of language teachers' immunity?

## The Study

### *Context*

The present research was set in the context of Iranian state sector educational system where foreign language teaching has witnessed a lot of ups and downs as a result of mainly political shifts in the history of the country (Farhady, Sajadi Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010; Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014; Zarrinabadi & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2018). The instruction of English as a school subject formally begins at first grade junior high school (grade 7<sup>th</sup>) when students are at the age of 12 or 13 and continues for six years until the last year of senior high school. All the decisions regarding teaching methods, textbooks, and assessment procedures are made centrally by the Ministry of Education. For years, the dominant teaching method was Grammar Translation Method and English textbooks promoted deductive teaching of grammatical points, memorization of vocabulary items, and the ability to translate texts from English to Farsi. Traces of the Audio-lingual method were also observable in doing drills, pattern practice, and limited teaching of language functions. No serious consideration was made of teaching listening and speaking skills. Recently, however, the Ministry of Education has promoted the use of a localized communicative approach through the introduction of the *English for Schools* series including *Prospect* and *Vision* textbooks for junior and senior high schools, respectively. The former textbook series has been intended to facilitate the development of all four language skills with a particular emphasis placed on listening and speaking whereas the latter one aims at developing mainly writing and reading skills (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2016; Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2018; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015, 2016). Iranian state sector EFL teachers have to teach English textbooks from cover to cover with a weekly allocated time of 2-4 hours. Every EFL teacher works for 24 hours per week, except those with more than 20 years of experience whose weekly teaching hours are reduced to 20 hours.

### *Participants*

The participants of the study were 15 (10 male and 5 female) in-service EFL teachers working at the state sector. The rationale behind the selection of in-service EFL teachers was the need to take account of language teachers' experience of the influence of contextual factors while the focus on public sector was to control for the variable contextual factors in public and private sectors. The participants were drawn through convenience sampling technique. Specific details regarding the participants' background information are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Participants' Demographics*

Gender (%)		M/A (years)	Degree (%)		Major (%)			Teaching level (%)		MTE (years)	MWTH
Male	Female		B.A.	M.A.	TEFL	EL	L	J	H		
66.67	33.33	42.33	53.33	46.67	46.67	20	33.33	33.33	46.67	23.06	21.73

Notes: M/A= mean age; B.A. = Bachelor of Arts; M.A. = Master of Arts; TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language; EL= English Literature; L= Linguistics; J= Junior High School; H= High School; MTE= Mean Teaching Experience; MWTH= Mean Weekly Teaching Hours

### *Instruments*

Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection instruments in the current research. The provisional interview protocol started with an introduction to the study as well as clear specifications of the participants' rights which was meant to be read over at the beginning of the interview session while the next section, involved questions on the participants' profiles. The main body of the interview began with the section on language teacher immunity and questions on such relevant issues as the triggers of immunity and language teachers' strategies to cope with those triggers. Examples of questions included:

- What are the factors that cause professional pressure in language teachers?
- How do you cope with stressful situations in your job?
- Some language teachers accept stressful situations as part of their profession and use them as opportunities for change. Some others prefer to avoid stress altogether and try to keep their balance. Which group do you believe you belong to?
- What are the most effective strategies to help teachers use stressful situations as opportunities for positive change?

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Prior to the interview session, the target EFL teachers were contacted by one of the researchers and invited to take part in a study on their environmental stressors and coping strategies. Moreover, the participants' rights to voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidential treatment of their data were clearly explained both at the invitation to the study stage and at the actual interview session. Upon granting consent, further arrangements were made regarding interview time and venue, which were always decided by the EFL teachers. The interviews were conducted in Farsi, the official language of the country, in order to ensure comprehension and provide the EFL teachers with the opportunity to express themselves freely although the participants could opt to use English in case they believed it helped them further clarify their points. The interviewer (one of the researchers), then, obtained the permission to record the interview using the Voice Recorder application of a Galaxy J7 (2016) Samsung smartphone. Subsequently, the interviewer took a note of the participants' background information on an

interview form in addition to audio-recording their voice. The shortest and the longest interviews lasted 25:30" and 39:15", respectively, resulting in an average interview time of 27:23". Data collection was stopped when the data reached saturation level. The sign of this saturation was that further data collection merely added to the bulk of the data rather than contributing to the informative content.

To analyze, the audio-recorded files were listened to carefully first and then transcribed verbatim. The documents were then imported to MAXQDA Analytics Pro version 12.3. The coding of the data started with the open coding stage in which the recurrent themes were extracted. In the axial coding phase, the relationship between the extracted themes was identified and code groups such as teacher-related factors, contextual factors, and educational factors were generated. Finally, in the selective coding stage, the code groupings were classified under pre-identified categories. To ensure the credibility of coding, a colleague was asked to recode 10% of the data (Cohen's Kappa = .91).

## Findings

### *Triggers of Language Teacher Immunity*

The analysis of the interview data revealed that only 2 teachers believed that teaching English was not a stressful job. In response to the question of whether they believed teaching English was a stressful job, interviewees 02 and 04 provided a negative response. The remaining 13 (86.67%) EFL teachers, however, believed that teaching English was a stressful profession and identified a number of factors as triggers of professional stress in language teaching. Those factors were categorized under *teacher-related*, *student-related*, *educational*, and *contextual* factors. The categorization of the triggering factors under teacher, student, educational, and contextual disturbances, instead of philosophy, principle, theory, practice and beyond practice (Farrell, 2016), was to employ a more concrete, rather than an abstract, taxonomy in which the involving agents and their immediate responsibilities in taking due repair actions could be precisely identified.

Regarding teacher-related factors, *low confidence in one's own linguistic proficiency* was a major trigger of stress among the present participants. Extract 1 substantiates this concern among EFL teachers. The extracts have been translated from Farsi into English and, to keep the original message, most extracts have been translated literally.

*Extract 1: Sometimes, students ask questions which I may not be able to answer and, thus, I feel stressed. These questions are mainly on vocabulary, rather than grammar. English words are forgotten very easily and if you are not proficient, you would feel under pressure in those moments (interviewee 03).*

*Lack of adequate preparation* was reported as another teacher-related source of stress as evident in the following extract.

*Extract 2: If the teacher does not prepare him/herself prior to teaching a class, s/he would feel a great pressure (interviewee 14).*

The final teacher-related stressor pertained to teachers' *personal problems* as shown in the following extract.

*Extract 3: Sometimes, teachers lose concentration because of the problems they have in their own personal life and this affects the level of professional stress they experience (interviewee 01).*

Concerning student-related factors, *limited success in learning English* on the part of the learners was one of the triggers of stress among the EFL teachers. Extract 4 was taken from the EFL teachers' interview data as evidence in this regard.

*Extract 4: Our students are not really successful in learning English and this causes stress among language teachers (interviewee 13).*

The next triggering disturbance among EFL teachers rooted in students was *learner demotivation* as indicated by the following extract.

*Extract 5: Our students have no motivation and show no interest in either learning English or other school subjects (interviewee 13).*

With respect to educational factors, some participants suggested that professional stress was triggered by *the pressure inherent in the nature of teaching a foreign language* as "It is very difficult to teach a language other than students' mother tongue in such a way that they can learn it up to an expected level of mastery" (interviewee 06). The second most frequently mentioned educational source of professional stress was *lack of enough time* allocated to teaching English in the Iranian educational system. Extract 6 was taken from the EFL teachers' interview data as supporting evidence in this respect.

*Extract 6: The amount of time specified for teaching English, I mean the weekly teaching hour, causes a lot of stress. We have to teach English in a very short time, which is impossible. The time is really short. You have to both teach and get feedback from your students in this very short time (interviewee 06).*

The next educational factor pertained to the *English textbooks* in which "the lessons build on one another, but they are misplaced in their sequential order and there are lessons which are above the students' level of understanding in terms of vocabulary and textual difficulty" (interviewee 07). *Lack of effective teacher training* "despite a revolutionary change in English textbooks" (interviewee 03) was recognized as another educational triggering disturbance among the participants. The final educational source of professional stress was the *University Entrance Exam (UEE)*. The following extract is a piece of relevant evidence in this respect.

*Extract 7: ... The next issue we have is the UEE and the type of test items we have on this exam. Most questions are reading-based and English teachers have to teach reading strategies because without knowing those strategies, students cannot answer the questions. English teachers experience a great deal of stress over how to teach those reading strategies (interviewee 15).*

The participants of the current research also identified a number of contextual triggers of language teacher immunity. *Limited facilities* was the most frequently mentioned contextual stressor. The second contextual stressor was *parents' high expectations of EFL teachers*. The following extract indicates how parental expectations triggered stress among EFL teachers.

*Extract 8: Our students' parents have unrealistic expectations regarding the level of success on the part of the learners. Moreover, most students obtain high scores in junior high schools and their parents*



*expect them to get similar scores in senior high schools without considering the fact that their children's educational level has changed. These factors put pressure on us as English teachers (interviewee 12).*

The next contextual trigger of immunity among EFL teachers, as shown in the following extract, was *negative attitudes toward teaching* as a profession.

*Extract 9: It is sometimes said that teaching is an easy job and teachers work for 20 hours a week with clean [neat and tidy] children and that is all (interviewee 11).*

Finally, *lack of contact with native speakers of English* was reported as another contextual factor causing professional stress and triggering immunity among teachers. The following extract offers a piece of relevant evidence in this regard.

*Extract 10: Because of lack of any contact with English and speakers of English, the link between what we teach and the outside world is weak. It is, therefore, difficult to justify what we are doing and this is stressful (interviewee 07)*

### *Coupling Strategies*

To deal with the above mentioned teacher-related, student-related, educational, and contextual triggers of language teacher immunity in the Iranian state sector educational system, EFL teachers adopted a number of coupling or coping strategies. Not surprisingly, most of these coping strategies were targeted at the triggering disturbances and, thus, could be categorized under the same labels, namely *teacher-related*, *student-related*, *educational*, and *contextual* strategies.

One of the most important coupling strategies targeted at immunity triggers rooted in EFL teachers themselves was *prior preparation*. EFL teachers tried to prepare themselves before actually teaching a lesson by “*checking the pronunciation of every word and the meaning of all vocabulary items*” (interviewee 15). An equally important coupling strategy was *keeping up-to-date*, especially in terms of “*linguistic proficiency*” (interviewee 11) as a way to boost self-confidence and buffer stress. *Writing lesson plans* was the last teacher-related coupling strategy identified by the participants of the present study as evident in extract 11.

*Extract 11: We should have lesson plans and review in our mind the events that are going to happen in class. This can greatly help relieve stress (interviewee 11).*

Regarding student-related coupling strategies, EFL teachers believed that *motivating students* could be effective in eliminating stress and encouraging learners to invest effort in learning English. As shown in the following extract, EFL teachers tried to motivate students by establishing a good rapport with learners and using fun.

*Extract 12: If you come to my class, you will see that the atmosphere is very friendly and I have a good relationship with all my students. I even speak in local languages sometimes as a fun way to begin or end a session (interviewee 07).*

Concerning coupling strategies used to deal with the educational triggers of immunity, EFL teachers suggested *effective time management* as a helpful technique. Relevant supporting evidence is provided in the following extract.

*Extract 13: We have asked the authors of English textbooks and the Ministry of Education to increase the time allocated to teaching English. By then, we have to manage time effectively by focusing on the most important points (interviewee 07).*

The last relevant strategy particularly targeted at the lack of effective training was *creating supportive networks*, as evident in the following extract.

*Extract 14: We hold different meetings with our colleagues and talk about the most recent teaching methods compatible with changes in the new English textbooks. Additionally, we use social media to share ideas about teaching methods with our colleagues from different provinces and cities (interviewee 12).*

As to the coupling strategies adopted to overcome contextual sources of language teacher immunity, EFL teachers exercised agency in *providing the audio-visual facilities* required to teach English by taking their own *“laptop or other portable devices such as a recorder or a speaker”* (interviewee 09) to class. The next contextual coupling strategy was *managing parental expectations* through *“holding regular meetings at schools with learners’ parents and talking to them about how the level of English textbooks has changed as well as ask theming them to have reasonable expectations and not to be so concerned with scores”* (interviewee 12). Finally, the participants of the current research believed that *adapting teaching methods to contextual realities* could assist language teachers in managing contextual triggers of immunity.

*Extract 15: The methods we use in rural areas are very different from the ones we use in urban areas. In rural areas, we have to start teaching English from the very basic levels, but in urban areas students have some background in English because they take private English classes. Therefore, the first step is to have a clear understanding of the context and then making a decision on how to teach (interviewee 11).*

The triggers of language teacher immunity and the relevant coupling strategies presented above are summarized in Figure 1. The figure is a Code Matrix Browser generated using MAXQDA Analytics Pro Version 12.3 visual tools option. As shown in Figure 1, different categories and subcategories of triggering factors of language teacher immunity as well as the relevant coupling strategies identified by the participants are listed vertically under Code System. Across from the Code System are the individual interviewees (Int. 01-15). The small squares in the figure identify those EFL teachers who made a comment about each specific triggering factor and/or coupling strategy. Furthermore, the vertical Sum column indicates the number of comments made by the participants about each triggering factor and coupling strategy while the horizontal Sum column shows the number of contributions made by each participant. Finally, the cell with dotted borders in the point where the two sums meet indicates the total number of relevant comments in the interview data.

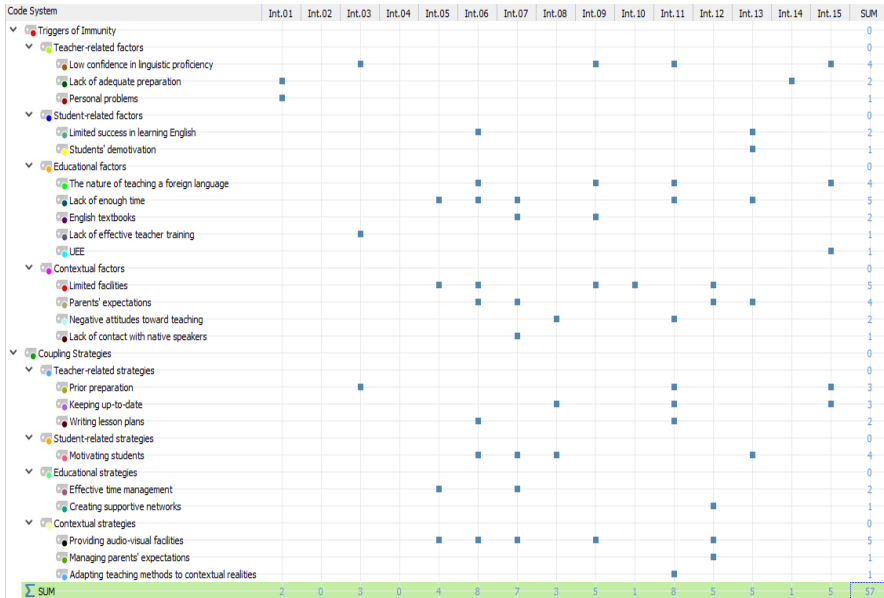


Figure 1. Triggering factors and coupling strategies of immunity among Iranian EFL teachers

Figure 1 indicates that interviewees 02 and 04, who believed EFL teaching was not a stressful profession, did not make any comments regarding the triggering disturbances and coupling strategies. Interviewees 06 and 11, on the other hand, greatly contributed to this part of the study by offering the highest number of comments. It also reveals that interviewees 10 and 14 adopted no coupling strategies to deal with those professional stressors they identified in their contexts.

*Developmental Stages of Language Teacher Immunity*

In response to whether their coupling strategies could bring them back to the state of equilibrium and effective functioning, 8 (61.54%) out of 13 (excluding interviewees 02 and 04) participants provided a positive response. Two (15.38%) other EFL teachers stated that their coupling strategies were only partially effective in setting them back into a balanced state. The remaining 3 (23.08%) EFL teachers, however, either did not take any actions to manage the stress (interviewees 10 and 14) or believed that their strategies were not effective in realigning them with a state of equilibrium (interviewee 05).

Moreover, all of the participants who tried to manage professional stress by adopting different coupling strategies provided a positive response to the question of whether their experience in dealing with an issue in the past had been of any value in handling professional tensions and contradictions which had come up later in their career. Additionally, one of the interview questions invited the participants to self-categorize themselves as either an EFL teacher who believed professional stressors provided him/her with the opportunity to learn and develop professionally or as an EFL teacher who would like to avoid risk, change, and stressful situations. The design of the question was informed by drawing on the characteristics of maladaptively immunized EFL teachers in terms of being resistant to change, avoiding risks, callousness, apathy, and conservatism as described by Hiver and Dörnyei (2017). The analysis of the participants' responses to this question indicated that 6 (40%) participants were maladaptively immunized EFL

teachers. The remaining 9 (60%) participants were positively immunized and believed that change and taking risks were part of the language teaching profession.

#### *Language Teacher Immunity Manipulation Strategies*

Regarding EFL teachers' voice in language teacher immunity manipulation strategies, the participants of the study almost unanimously expressed that they wanted more time to teach English, as shown in the following sample extract.

*Extract 16: I cannot do anything concerning lack of enough teaching time. How many extra hours can I work with my students to remedy their weakness (interviewee 06)?*

A different strategy regarding rebooting language teacher immunity was proposed by interviewee 10 who believed "Teaching English should begin at fifth or sixth grade primary school and students should learn at least some basic English words then." As another strategy, interviewee 15 suggested that policy makers should change their attitude toward English and teaching English at schools.

*Extract 17: Educational authorities should adopt a positive attitude toward teaching English and appreciate what English teachers do. Knowing English is the key to being connected with the rest of the world and learning from other nations.*

Finally, the participants believed that teachers, including English teachers, deserved a higher social status and raising teachers' salary could be of a great help in this regard.

*Extract 18: Something should be done regarding teachers' income. Unfortunately, most teachers have to work in a second job to pay for their living expenses. Students also know that their teachers work in other jobs and this is not really good. A teacher should spend his/her free time studying, preparing for his/her classes, and thinking about creative ways of teaching rather than working in other jobs to earn a living (interviewee 06).*

## **Discussion**

The findings of the present study reveal that most EFL teachers, reflecting on their past teaching experience, believe that language teaching is a highly stressful profession and the origins of professional stress are rooted in EFL teachers themselves, learners, educational or organizational constraints, and contextual factors. As to teacher-related sources of disturbance, self-confidence appears to have a significant bearing on the level of stress experienced by EFL teachers. A lack of such self-confidence may stem from an EFL teacher's limited linguistic proficiency and/or insufficient preparation. Regarding the triggers caused by students, learners' demotivation and low achievement are the two major professional stressors among EFL teachers. The most serious causes of professional stress, however, are rooted in such educational restrictions as lack of enough time, limited effective teacher training, and a mismatch between teaching and testing procedures. With respect to contextual factors, limited facilities, parental expectations, negative attitudes toward teachers, and lack of contact with English speaking groups are the most prominent triggers of language teacher immunity.

To eliminate teacher-related factors, EFL teachers usually try to prepare themselves for their classes in advance by checking vocabulary and pronunciation, writing lesson plans, and keeping themselves up-to-date in terms of both linguistic proficiency and professional knowledge and skills. EFL teachers also try to attract their learners' cooperation by motivating them through using fun and establishing a good rapport with them. To relieve educational tensions, language teachers try to manage the available time effectively and share helpful teaching ideas in regular

meetings or through social media. Finally, to manage contextual sources of professional stress, EFL teachers exercise agency in providing the required audio-visual facilities and adapt their teaching methods to the realities of the context in which they teach. Meanwhile, they aim at redefining parental expectations by holding meetings and negotiating what is teachable and learnable within the limits of their educational environment.

The findings also indicate that the coupling strategies adopted by EFL teachers to handle professional stress are apparently effective in bringing most teachers back to a state of equilibrium. There are, however, teachers whose strategies are partially effective and a few EFL teachers who believe that some triggering disturbances (e.g., time) persist in their teaching environment despite their struggle to overcome them. Nevertheless, the experience of coping with a particular stressor becomes part of language teachers' professional skills repertoire and assists them in dealing with incidents of similar stressors in future. These results show that the four stages of triggering, coupling, realignment, and stabilization as the main phases of self-organization are in operation among the Iranian state sector in-service EFL teachers.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the significance of coupling strategies in the final outcome of language teacher immunity. A caveat to this argument, however, is that some EFL teachers who are successful in adopting appropriate coupling strategies are also among negatively immunized EFL teachers. A feature these language teachers have in common is a lack of interest in taking risk, which may explain why they self-identify themselves among EFL teachers who do not believe in the potential value of disturbances in professional development. Additionally, the findings suggest that possessing the features of maladaptively or positively immunized language teachers is apparently a matter of degree rather than a neat either/or categorization. Regarding their voice, EFL teachers' concentration on insufficient amount of teaching time and low income limits their ideas on language teacher immunity manipulation strategies. All of the proposed strategies are macro level decisions which require due attention on the part of the educational policy makers and administrators. As such, EFL teachers apparently assume that educational reforms and the ensuing changes are helpful in dislodging them from their excessively stable safe zones. Generally, the coupling strategies employed by the participants entail that reflection is an integrated practice targeted at a whole host of personal, educational, and sociocultural factors rather than being limited to the actual classroom practice per se.

In terms of triggering disturbances, the findings of the present study partially agree with those of Hiver (2015, 2017). Lack of time, which is one of the educational factors of professional stress in the current research, is among the triggers of language teacher immunity found by Hiver (2017) in the Korean EFL context. Lack of student cooperation as a factor of instability among Korean EFL teachers (Hiver, 2017) appears in the form of students' demotivation in the Iranian state sector education. Three other triggers of language teacher immunity, namely students' misbehavior (Hiver, 2017), discouraging evaluation of teachers' instructional activities, and the rejection of teacher initiatives (Hiver, 2015), however, are not identified as triggering disturbances by the participants of the present study. Students' misbehavior may not be an important disturbance in the Iranian educational context due to EFL teachers' friendly relationship with learners, as shown in the interview data. Moreover, evaluating teachers' performance, which may occasionally be discouraging, is a common practice in all educational settings including the Iranian context, but seemingly it does not have a noticeable disturbing effect among Iranian EFL teachers. Rejection of teacher initiatives may be missing in the Iranian context due to the fact that all educational decisions are made centrally by the Iranian Ministry of Education and there is little room for teacher initiatives.

Regarding coupling strategies, realignment, and stabilization, the findings of the current study completely agree with those of Hiver (2015). In a similar vein as Korean EFL teachers, who try

new methods and modify their reactions in response to contextual factors (Hiver, 2015), the participants of the present research try to adopt new methods and adapt their teaching methods to the realities of their context and their learners' linguistic background. Furthermore, the coupling strategies of both Korean and Iranian EFL teachers are mostly effective in setting them back to the state of effective functioning and most of these strategies become part of their professional experience.

Despite its limitations, mainly in terms of the number of interview participants, a number of implications can be drawn from the present study. First of all, the study identifies a significant role played by EFL teachers' agency in resolving teacher-related, student-related, and contextual disturbances. Nevertheless, it reveals that resolving such educational issues as lack of enough time to teach English requires the attention of educational authorities. Thus, it also implies that agency may not be fully effective in coping with those stressors for which policy makers have to take due measures. It may be possible, therefore, to introduce the concept of *imposed maladaptive immunity* conceptualized as an emotional state in which EFL teachers may feel that no matter how hard they struggle and regardless of their agentive actions, their effort to teach English is doomed to failure due to unsupportive macro-level policies. *Imposed maladaptive immunity* is, in fact, the transition stage to maladaptive immunity. That is, rather than immediately setting into a state of indifference upon perceiving a disturbance, EFL teachers develop maladaptive immunity after their agentive efforts are not supported by the involved parties, especially macro-level policy makers.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that teacher education courses should not focus on developing EFL teachers' professional content knowledge per se. Effective teacher education programs should incorporate instructions on how to reflect on and cope with unavoidable environmental stressors and professional tensions inherent in the nature of teaching a foreign language. Hopefully, mastering integrated reflective skills in teacher education courses can help EFL teachers to form a productive version of language teacher immunity.

## Conclusion

The current research examined the formation of language teacher immunity, as an integrated reflective practice, among Iranian state sector EFL teachers. More specifically, it tried to identify the triggering disturbances of immunity, the coupling strategies adopted by EFL teachers to deal with those disturbances, the developmental stages of immunity among EFL teachers as well as to represent language teachers' voice in rebooting the formation of immunity. The study revealed that lack of self-confidence among some EFL teachers, students' demotivation, lack of enough time to teach English, low income, and parental expectations were the most commonly reported triggers of immunity in the Iranian public sector educational system. EFL teachers tried to cope with these disturbances by prior preparation for lessons, establishing a friendly rapport with learners, working for extra hours in remedial sessions, and negotiating objectives with learners' parents. Moreover, EFL teachers exercised their agency in resolving such issues as lack of facilities at some schools. The study also introduced the concept of *imposed maladaptive immunity* as a condition brought about by exercising agency in unsupportive contexts. *Imposed maladaptive immunity* is a transitional stage from struggling with disturbances to residing in a state of complete indifference.

One of the major objectives of the present study was to introduce language teacher immunity as an integrated reflective practice. The reference to language teacher immunity as an *integrated reflective practice* stems from the fact that both immunity and reflective practice pertain to the idea of change and are believed to assist in preventing language teacher attrition. On the other hand, while the locus of reflection is practice, which is the point of departure even in Farrell's idea of

*beyond practice*, language teacher immunity involves the exploration of personal, sociocultural, and educational factors of which practice is only one of the many aspects. The purpose here is not to replace the concept of reflective practice with language teacher immunity or to subsume one concept under the other, but to familiarize EFL teachers with another reflective tool. Hopefully, drawing on different reflective measures can enhance EFL teachers' emotional well-being as well as their practice.

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