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"I Don't Like Working Hard to Materialize Another Person's Dreams": The Emotion Labor and Identity Dilemma of a Novice Iranian Female EFL Teacher at Private Language Institutes

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Abstract: Emotion labor is defined as any conflict between institutional demands and teachers' professional beliefs and preferences. Engaging in emotion labor is an inevitable aspect of becoming a language teacher. Scholars agree that language teacher agency and identity are closely tied to emotion labor. This fact particularly looms large for novice language teachers, who tend to perceive contradictions between what they imagine prior to entering the profession and what they actually experience in their teaching contexts. This case study applied activity theory (Engeström, 2015) and Gee's (2000) identity framework to explore how the emotion labor experienced by a novice Iranian female teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) over a five-year career period at three private language institutes affected her language teacher agency and identity. The findings, obtained from class observations and semi-structured interviews, highlight two major sources of emotion labor: 1) profit-oriented policy, and 2) performance-constraining factors within the institute, which caused the participant to contemplate quitting her job. Implications and further research are discussed in line with the interplay among emotion labor, language teacher identity, and well-being.

Keywords: Emotion Labor, Language Teacher Identity, Language Teacher Agency, Well-being, Novice EFL Teachers, Private Language Institutes.

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Introduction

The construction of language teacher identity (LTI) cannot be imagined without considering the sociocultural factors of the teaching context (Feryok, 2012) as well as the gamut of emotions that language teachers experience in their practice (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). For this reason, becoming a second language (L2) teacher transcends performing an assigned role; rather, it requires devoting the self to the teaching job (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Johnson and Golombek (2016) believe that teaching is a deeply personal experience in ways rarely introduced in teacher preparation programs. Other scholars (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Lee, 2013; Nazari, Seyri, & Karimpour, 2023) have attested to the inevitable discrepancies between what language teachers, particularly novices, imagine prior to entering the profession and what they experience in their work contexts which often brings about feelings of tension known as emotion labor (Benesch, 2017).

Research has revealed that different factors contribute to teacher emotion labor. These include but are not limited to, institutional discourses (Benesch, 2018), high-stakes tests (Benesch, 2020a), materials and grading students' assignments (Loh & Liew, 2016), the institutes' feeling rules (Song, 2016), and disruptive students (Yazan & Peercy, 2016). Importantly, as argued by Benesch (2020a) and evidenced by Razeq (2023) and Mbagwu (2023), even social conditions beyond the classroom, such as financial difficulties, overworking, and lack of proper accommodation, are potential sources of emotion labor that could disrupt teachers' instructional effectiveness.

Thus, engaging in emotion labor is part and parcel of being and becoming a language teacher (Loh & Liew, 2016). This looms large in the Iranian English as a Foreign language (EFL) context, where different factors often hinder teachers' ideal teaching, namely parents' interference in teachers' instruction (Feryok & Askaribigdeli, 2019), sticking to the institute's rigid syllabus (Nazari & Karimpour, 2022), conforming to institutional ideologies (Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2019), and giving undeserved scores to unqualified students (Mirzaei & Aliakbari, 2018). There is still much to be learned about how emotion labor affects the identity construction of Iranian EFL teachers at private language institutes, particularly that of novices, as emotionally-charged teaching incidents account for the lion's share of teachers' early exodus from the profession (Schutz & Lee, 2014). Also, emotion labor is believed to trigger agency (Benesch, 2018), and teacher agency has considerable bearing on the LTI makeup (Hiver & Whitehead,

2018). Thus, in the present study, we sought to contribute to this line of inquiry by answering the following question: How does the emotion labor experienced by a novice Iranian female EFL teacher at private language institutes influence her language teacher agency and identity?

Theoretical Framework

We applied Engeström's (2015) third-generation activity theory and Gee's (2000) identity framework as our theoretical foundation. The third-generation activity theory, built on Vygotsky's (1978) first- and Leont'ev's (1978) second-generation activity theory, makes inward and outward analyses within and between activity systems feasible (Engeström, 2015). Moving inward, it investigates issues such as "subjectivity, personal sense, emotion, embodiment, identity, and moral commitment" (Engeström, 2015, pp. 15-16) while dealing with interconnected activity systems by moving outward. Engeström (2001) maintains that an activity system includes a community of multiple attitudes—and the division of labor assigns individuals different positions, causing them to interpret the object of the activity differently (Gee, 2008). The object of the activity system is potentially "a nexus of power and resistance in language educational contexts" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 223). That is, the object of the activity system normally brings about contradiction, thus prompting individuals to take collective actions to reconstruct the activity system by resolving the contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Engeström (2001) refers to this conscious and deliberate process as *expansive learning*, which resembles Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development.

In modern activity theory (Engeström, 2015), individuals' actions take place through the interconnection of seven components. The *subject* is the individual whose emotions, agency, and identity are the focus of the analysis. The *object* is the focus of all actions in an activity system. The object is gradually transformed into an *outcome*, which can be shaped by different *mediating artifacts*. The *community* refers to a number of individuals who pursue the same object. Within each community, there is a *division of labor* that determines the duties of its members. Also, how things are done within a community is governed by explicit and implicit *rules*.

The second theoretical lens underpinning our study is Gee's (2000) identity framework. Gee (2000) distinguishes among four types of identity: Nature or N-Identity (a trait given by nature), Institutional or I-Identity (a position authorized by institutions), Discursive or D-Identity (an individual trait shaped through language), and Affinity or A-Identity, which is achieved by "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" (p. 105). However, he asserts that these are not discrete entities; rather, a person might enact different identities within a particular

context. Gee (2000) lays great emphasis on the role of recognition in assigning individuals certain identities. His emphasis on the role of discourse and practice in constructing identity (Gee, 2000, 2008) is associated with the main classifications of LTI, namely identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice (Varghese et al., 2005). Related to our study, Gee (2000) envisages I-Identities on a continuum in terms of how actively and passively the occupants of these positions fulfill their duties, termed *calling* or *imposition*, respectively. For instance, motivated teachers are highly invested in their profession (i.e., enacting an I-Identity that could be described as a *calling*) while unmotivated teachers perform their duties with little enthusiasm (i.e., enacting an I-Identity that could be described as an *imposition*). AT, along with Gee's framework, provides a good picture of how language teachers navigate identity options when engaged in emotion labor resulting from the contradictions that they perceive in the activity systems of their schools and institutes.

Literature Review

Theorizing Emotion Labor

Hochschild (1983) first used *emotional labor* for the undesired emotions that Delta Airlines' flight attendants experienced due to the prescribed feeling rules of their job. The feeling rules required that flight attendants show kindness to the passengers throughout the flights, even if they were treated aggressively by the passengers. Hochschild (1983) found that the prescribed feeling rules inflicted too much emotional labor on the flight attendants, making them experience conflict between their authentic and assigned selves. This dichotomization of selves was later challenged since some flight attendants were found protesting against the feeling rules prescribed by the airlines' headquarters (Benesch, 2017). Referring to power relations as a missing element in Hochschild's conceptualization of emotional labor, Benesch (2017) argued, "Workers are not necessarily fragile dupes who unquestioningly and mindlessly adhere to feeling rules and then find themselves incapable of responding to insults" (p. 43). In fact, Benesch (2017) implied that the emotion labor of some of the flight attendants prompted them to exercise their agency by resisting the feeling rules of the airline. Detaching herself from the negativity associated with the word *emotional* in Hochschild's terminology, Benesch began to use the phrase *emotion labor* instead.

In the English language teaching (ELT) field, Benesch (2018) sees emotion labor as any conflict between institutional feeling rules and demands and teachers' professional beliefs and preferences. Albeit a harmful phenomenon from Hochschild's perspective, emotion labor

is now deemed as conducive to teacher agency (e.g., Benesch, 2018, 2020b) on the condition that the affected teachers reinterpret it as an affordance rather than a debilitating constraint. Since any discussion of teacher identity without considering agency is untenable (Tao & Gao, 2017), the following section explores how teachers' agentive actions are triggered by their emotions.

Emotions and Teacher Agency

Agency is seen as taking relevant and significant actions in a particular sociocultural setting (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Tao and Gao (2021) argue that agency is not a genetic trait to be enacted in isolation. Rather individuals act on the available affordances in their context to bring about desired changes (White, 2018). A gamut of emotions that teachers experience in their schools could serve as an affordance prompting them to enact their agency to improve their work conditions (Feryok, 2012) or to survive their institution's policy change (Liu & Xu, 2011).

Feryok (2012) depicted how Nune, a novice Armenian EFL teacher, aptly capitalized on her colleagues' revived enthusiasm for English in the early years of Armenian independence to improve conditions in her school. Although the school principal stifled Nune's initial attempts to hold seminars for her colleagues, she cajoled her into permitting the seminar with a photocopier grant. Benesch (2018), exploring the emotion labor of thirteen English instructors, found that the majority of the instructors resisted their institute's legalistic plagiarism policy—a collective action that prompted them to transform plagiarism-detection instances into teaching academic writing. In the same spirit, Benesch (2020b) sought the opinions of fifteen English as a second language (ESL) instructors about a high-stakes literacy test for the immigrant students. She found that the instructors unanimously experienced emotion labor since they perceived that the so-called test had positioned them as "dubious gatekeepers" (p. 8) rather than reliable language instructors. Benesch also found that the instructors' reflection on their emotion labor caused them to have reservations about the fairness and social consequences of the test.

Emotion (Labor) and LTI

Barkhuizen (2017) defines LTIs as cognitive, social, historical, and emotional. Two immediately recognizable elements in the conceptualization of LTI are personal and professional identities (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020), meaning that apart from pedagogical

knowledge, the construction of LTI depends crucially on teachers' emotional involvement in the profession. Therefore, identity construction is a prolonged process (Lee, 2013) through which teachers become comfortable with the personal and professional selves that they have constructed (Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

There has been a growing number of LTI research in recent years (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Liu & Xu, 2011; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022; Song, 2016; Yazan, 2019). Although emotion has not been the primary focus in some of these studies, its lingering effect is easily traceable in teachers' identity construction. Also, the bulk of LTI research has been devoted to novice teachers (e.g., Feryok & Askaribigdeli, 2019; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Wolff & De Costa, 2017) mainly because becoming a language teacher is normally a challenging transition process for novices (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022).

Golombek and Doran (2014) showed how emotional mediation, along with instructional tips provided by a teacher educator, helped Josie, a novice English teacher, forge a desired professional identity. Liu and Xu (2011) explored how a Chinese novice EFL teacher, Hui, negotiated her professional identity to survive a curriculum change after initially quitting her institute because of the overwhelming demands of preparing the materials based on the new curriculum. Wolff and De Costa (2017) also demonstrated that the LTI of Puja, a novice Bangladeshi female English teacher, was remarkably enriched thanks to the favorable sociocultural atmosphere as well as the abundant resources that she experienced during a teacher preparation program in the U.S.

Other researchers have also investigated the role of emotion labor in LTI construction, though not particularly with novice teachers. Song (2016) explored five Korean English teachers' emotional reactions toward returnee students who had completed their elementary school in the US. She found that the all-knowing image of teachers in South Korean culture negatively affected the teachers' practice and identity. In an Iranian context, Nazari and Karimpour (2022) also studied the effect of emotion labor on the identity construction of ten Iranian, predominantly female, EFL teachers who taught at the Iran Language Institute (ILI). They found that having to teach based on the institute's prescribed syllabus caused the teachers enormous emotion labor due to the perceived contradictions between their internal feelings and their ought-to-adopt instruction. However, caring for students' needs prompted the teachers to join a Telegram group in order to share their instructional concerns, which resulted in the revival of teachers' constrained agency and the enactment of their desired LTIs

even in the presence of the supervisors.

Block (2017) maintains that due to neoliberalism policies, teachers' status has recently been relegated to "mere in-person servers" (p. 35) who have to meet their institutions' demands in order to survive the teaching market. Likewise, Mercer (2020) expressed concern that the well-being of teachers at private language institutes is at stake due to unfavorable work conditions. This concern is even more serious for novice language teachers, who tend to quit their profession if unpleasant job-related emotions persist (see Loh & Liew, 2016). Private language institutes in Iran are no exception, where a large number of English graduates end up teaching in these institutes, struggling to meet growing job demands "to make a living" (Nazari & Molana, 2022, p. 19). Therefore, in this study, we aim to investigate how the emotion labor of a novice Iranian female teacher, Farzaneh (pseudonym), who teaches English in a private language institute, affects her language teacher agency and identity.

Methodology

The aim of this qualitative case study was to explore how the emotion labor experienced by a novice Iranian female EFL teacher at private language institutes influenced her language teacher agency and identity. In the sections below, we offer more detailed information about the study, the participant, and data collection and analysis.

Research Context and Participant

In Iran, English courses are offered either in public high schools or private language institutes. However, the paucity of exposure to English use in public schools (Riazi, 2005) has prompted a large influx of language learners from a wide age range to enroll in English courses in private language institutes (Mohammadian Haghighi & Norton, 2017). The Iranian EFL teachers at private language institutes are usually contracted and are paid, on average, 60,000 Tomans (about 1 US dollar) per session. They are normally supposed to follow their institute's prescribed syllabus and are required to finish the assigned textbook within a certain number of sessions. The supervisors within the institutes periodically observe the teachers' classes. Also, the textbooks taught at the institutes are published internationally.

For clarification, the data collected in this study span three private language institutes, which represent Farzaneh's professional trajectory. The data pertaining to the first two institutes are of retrospective nature. This means that the interview questions prompted

Farzaneh to delineate her teaching trajectory from the very beginning. The focal research context of this study was the third institute where she was teaching at the time of the study. Farzaneh's current institute was selected mainly because the first author used to teach there; thus, his familiarity with the atmosphere of the institute aided in investigating the topic at hand. The class that the first author chose to observe was an intermediate-level course using the textbook *Top Notch 2B*. It included thirteen female English learners. Our participant, Farzaneh, was 31 years old. She had earned a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English literature and was pursuing a Master of Arts (MA) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Farzaneh started teaching English in 2017, hence being a novice teacher. According to Farrell (2012), teachers with teaching experience between one to five years are considered novices. Farzaneh was writing her master's thesis at the time of our study. Through purposive sampling, the first author selected Farzaneh because it was assumed that the simultaneity of her MA TEFL program and her teaching would shed interesting light on her agency enactment and identity construction against the backdrop of her emotion labor in her institute.

Data Collection

Class observations (CO) and semi-structured interviews (I) were used to examine how Farzaneh's emotion labor affected her language teacher agency and identity. The first author was responsible for collecting data due to his easy access to the institute. A week before starting data collection, he went to the institute to meet up with Farzaneh to ask her permission to participate in the study. When she agreed to take part in the study, the first author began observing Farzaneh's classes and interviewing her, which began in mid-October 2022 and ended in December of the same year. There were six class observations and ten interview sessions. During the observations, the first author looked for emotionally-charged teaching moments that caused Farzaneh to engage in emotion labor.

Also, the first author kept an eye open for the social dynamics of the research site, assuming that painstaking observation would subsequently shed light on Farzaneh's interview responses. For example, one day, the first author was sitting in the staff room with the manager and saw him taking off the table a pack of biscuits in a mean manner and putting it in the closet, saying with a perfunctory smile, "Don't you like to eat? Teachers don't care about the expenses". This moment afforded the first author a vantage point to interpret Farzaneh's interview responses better. Charmaz (2006) believes that the reimagination of scenes related to the participants and the research sites would provide food for thought and

thus facilitate interpreting the data. However, the first author did not let preconceptions affect Farzaneh's responses. Since class observations afford contextualized interview questions (Morris & King, 2020), they usually preceded the interview sessions. Class observations, coupled with the relevant literature on emotion labor, informed the interview questions. The interviews were mostly conducted in Farzaneh's mother tongue (i.e., Persian) as she opted to reply in Persian.

The interviews were conducted through WhatsApp to avoid making Farzaneh feel uncomfortable speaking frankly about sensitive issues while at the institute. Rolland, Dewaele, and Costa (2020) emphasize that careful consideration should be given to the interview venue to ensure the participant's privacy and comfort. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Interviews began with a leading question, to which Farzaneh often replied in the form of a voice message. As the first author used to teach in the same institute and hence was familiar with the research site, he sometimes indirectly referred to some emotion-labor-inducing incidents which existed in the institute to build up the necessary trust so that Farzaneh would not hesitate to share her real emotions while answering the questions.

Data Analysis

We employed grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006) to code the obtained data. According to Hadley (2020), the strength of the grounded theory lies in its development out of digging contextualized data rather than out of researchers' preconceptions. Thus, the first author continued interviewing Farzaneh until he reached data saturation (Dörnyei, 2007). The first author transcribed and translated the interviews. Then, initial codes were extracted using line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006).

To ensure the validity of the initial codes, the co-authors reread the transcribed data and double-checked the emerging findings. Then, we read the transcribed data again for the initial codes to be subsumed under focused categories. For example, in Interview 3, "I really felt faithful to his institute", was categorized as *A-Identity*; and in Interview 6, "We were asked to be nice to students as much as possible and never overreact even if they misbehave or fail to answer" was subsumed under *profit-oriented policy*. Importantly, the first author solicited Farzaneh's confirmation when recording her answers in the first draft of the manuscript to ensure the trustworthiness of her reported data at both descriptive and interpretive levels (Riazi, 2016). We relied on narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) to present Farzaneh's

data in a story-like fashion, with an eye on the emotion-labor-inducing factors that affected her agency and LTI.

Findings

We present the findings in three chronologically ordered sections as Farzaneh taught in three private language institutes. However, the bulk of the analysis will focus on the third institute, her current place of work, where she often engages in emotion labor, which affects her agency and LTI accordingly.

Farzaneh at the First Language Institute

At the beginning of her career, Farzaneh taught English for a year in a private language institute run by a female manager with a BA in TEFL. From the very early days, she felt "overwhelmed by the manager's overbearing behavior" (I1). Farzaneh said, "Although the manager had little English knowledge, she felt she was an all-knower" (I1). Farzaneh recalled one day when the manager observed a class and gave her "a dressing-down" in front of the students for her teaching style (I1). She added that her colleagues were also "the target of the manager's disrespectful behavior" in the staff room for the same reason (I1). Angrily describing her as "nouveau riche," Farzaneh added, "The manager just tried to please the language learners and their parents like what many private language institutes do these days to make more money out of tuition fees" (I1). The manager's interference was not just limited to teaching style. Farzaneh explained:

> *Apart from meddling in teaching, the manager also commented on the most personal issues, like asking me not to wear nail polish. She said that it might be a distraction for male teenage language learners. She didn't even allow us [female teachers] to take our purses and cellphones to the class (I2).*

Consequently, Farzaneh "faked being sick to avoid attending the institute to overcome my frustration," and when she went to the institute the next day, she found that her course had been canceled by the manager "without prior notice" (I2). When she called the manager and complained about it, the manager replied back in a harsh tone: "How dare you talk to me like this? Who do you think you are?" (I2). This skirmish put an end to Farzaneh's career at

the institute. Although the manager subsequently tried to persuade Farzaneh to return to the institute, she firmly said, "That won't happen again" (I2).

Farzaneh at the Second Language Institute

Before long, Farzaneh found a job at another private language institute that her childhood English teacher owned. The manager was a full-time university instructor of TEFL who taught advanced classes in his institute. Farzaneh recalled her "good days" in that institute as follows:

> *I used to be his best language learner. He trusted my teaching ability. I had full authority in my teaching. At the end of the day, he took a taxi for me and even paid for the fare. He even gave us a gift card for Teacher's Day. I really felt faithful to his institute. He respected his teachers and was usually supportive of them when confronted with language learners and their parents' occasional complaints. He never asked me to add to the scores of language learners (I3).*

Although the payment "was not very good," Farzaneh was satisfied with it because "the cost of living was not as high as it is these days" (I3). With the manager's retirement and his relocation to another city, Farzaneh stopped teaching after almost two years and began studying for an MA admission exam of TEFL "under my mom's advice" (I3). Farzaneh's MA program coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. She preferred to focus on her MA courses rather than looking for a teaching job, mainly due to "a lack of suitable platforms for teaching online classes in the institutes" (I3). She added with disapproval that online teaching during the pandemic in all the institutes of her city was "just limited to sending WhatsApp voice messages" (I3).

Farzaneh at the Third Language Institute

With the ease of pandemic restrictions and "needing to collect data for my MA thesis" Farzaneh decided to teach in "a well-known language institute of the city" (I4). Another full-time university instructor of TEFL owned the institute. After being interviewed by the manager, Farzaneh was assigned "a hectic schedule with classes for all levels" (I4). Having taken specific courses in her MA program had transformed Farzaneh's conceptualization of being a teacher:

I used to think that being a teacher was an easy job. But now I believe that it's a sensitive job. A teacher needs to be a psychologist as well because students come from different families, thus having different personalities and needs (I5).

Though Farzaneh was "highly motivated to start teaching after quite a while," a briefing given by the manager at the beginning of the semester made her feel that teaching in the new language institute "fell below my expectations" (I6). The manager asked teachers "to let all students go to higher levels even if they fail to obtain the required score" (I6). He also asked teachers "to be nice to students as much as possible and never overreact even if they misbehave or fail to answer questions in class" (I6). Although Farzaneh found the manager's expectations "very unreasonable" (I6), she accepted the job because teaching was her "passion" (I6).

In one of the sessions, Farzaneh was imploring students to answer the reading questions, but most of them remained silent—causing her to grow impatient (CO2). In the post-observation interview, she blamed the students' silence on the lack of administering placement tests at the institute:

I really feel frustrated when some students avoid speaking. I think the main reason is that they have been allowed to easily reach top levels without being qualified. There is almost no placement test in the institute. I once told the manager about this, but he didn't pay attention. I usually won't allow disqualified students to reach higher levels, though (I7).

Likewise, in another session (CO5), Farzaneh asked one of the students to read a section of the text aloud. However, the student was glued to her cell phone and giggled, apparently exchanging messages with her friends on social media. Farzaneh became impatient with the student when she started reading with tardiness. In the post-observation interview (I8), putting the blame on the "student-centeredness of private language institutes," she felt that her teacher authority was "sometimes really squeezed because of having to be always nice to language learners even when they misbehave or do not participate in class activities" (I8). She continued:

I always tell them to postpone sending messages until the end of the class, but they just like to enjoy their time in every situation. The manager also asks us [teachers] to be kind to the students and never overreact. This is not right at all. This makes me lose my motivation. I feel that my authority as a teacher suffers from their reckless behavior (I8).

However, Farzaneh had mixed feelings about her language learners. She tacitly referred to the resourcefulness needed to deal with this generation of students. She believed that "the wealth of knowledge" that some of the learners acquired through social media, especially during the quarantine period of COVID-19, gave them "the audacity" to challenge their teachers (I8). She added, "They only listen to English music. They know things that I don't. The content of the book is not challenging for some of them. Thus, they make a nuisance of themselves instead of listening to me" (I8). Farzaneh recalled her frustration in dealing with one of these students who interrupted her while teaching:

I had a student in my intermediate class who often questioned my pronunciation and also resisted my feedback on his essay by saying, "Are you sure, teacher?" His insincere questions made me very uncomfortable. I sometimes retaliated by asking him difficult questions to make him silent. Later, I tried to establish rapport with him, but it was not effective, so I had to ignore him (I8).

Farzaneh also reported that she occasionally had problems with some of the parents due to "their unreasonable expectations" mainly created by "the institute's client-centered policy" (I8). She lamented that "most private language institutes usually take parents' sides just for the sake of their own profit. They're just thinking about getting more tuition fees, ignoring teachers' efforts" (I8). She added that some parents' repeated demands for "assigning a little homework and being lenient have exhausted my patience" (I8). To validate her feelings of disappointment with the parents' transgressing the rules of a normal private language institute, she shared a related incident:

I had an elementary-school language learner whose parents twisted my arm to let him sit in the intermediate class so that their son would get his English diploma faster. I really don't know why parents hurry their kids into reaching top levels

without learning anything. Although I did so at the manager's insistence, the student couldn't pass the test (I8).

In another incident, Farzaneh was harshly criticized by the parents of an 11-year-old language learner for catching their son red-handed in the middle of a spelling test. Reiterating the "profit-seeking" manager as the main culprit for the parents' unreasonable behavior, she described the incident as follows:

I had a young language learner who was cheating when they were taking a spelling test. Upon seeing him, I asked him whether he felt guilty while cheating. Then he told his parents, and soon they came to the institute complaining why I talked to their son like that! These things really make me frustrated (I8).

Farzaneh felt pressured because of "too many dos and don'ts" in her current language institute compared to her previous institute, where the manager was "very caring and seldom surrendered to parents' unreasonable complaints" (I9). She said, "I sometimes feel nostalgic about my previous institute. The manager did not take the parents' side for his own profit" (I9). Being expected to give "unmerited scores" (I9) to unqualified language learners was so much at the forefront of Farzaneh's mind that she could not help dwelling on it:

The fact that we are supposed to let all students go to the next level makes me disappointed with my job. I once expressed my disapproval of it, but the manager just ignored it. Even other teachers complained about it, but nothing changed. I really won't allow disqualified students to reach higher levels. I do what I feel is beneficial for them (I9).

Another major source of frustration for Farzaneh was the institute's "low payment". She reported, "Meeting the growing demands of the job for a low salary really gets on my nerves. To tell you the truth, I'm here just to collect data for my MA thesis" (I9). Farzaneh added that the majority of private language institutes' owners "collect the fruits of teachers' hard work" (I10). Then, she elaborated on the unfavorable work conditions in the institute:

Teaching 90 minutes nonstop makes me exhausted. I used to give short breaks during teaching at my previous institute, but here I can't. Perhaps I have been ignoring my health. Even we asked the manager to buy a coffee maker so we could have coffee during the short break, but he evaded the issue. We also asked for a salary raise, but he said others [other institutes] pay even less. There's also a cramped staff room with stiff chairs. The institute used to be a house, so there is not enough space for teaching crowded classes like mine. I sometimes feel uncomfortable because I can't move while teaching. The walls are replete with old handwriting, which is a nasty look and a source of distraction to students. Even worse, there is a noisy window air conditioner in my class that I usually have to turn off when playing the recording for students (I10).

Farzaneh got "further disappointed" after their suggestion for holding a workshop for young learners was turned down by the manager:

My colleagues and I are like close friends, and during the break time, we talk and laugh in the staff room. Even the manager sometimes joins us there. Recently we had a meeting, and my colleagues and I eagerly recommended that we hold a workshop for kids, but the manager did not welcome the idea (I10).

Reiterating nonchalantly that the main reason for teaching at her current institute was to "collect data for my MA thesis," Farzaneh added, "I will teach fewer hours in the next semester because the manager is not grateful for my hard work" (I10). She hinted that the unsatisfactory work conditions in the institute made her almost lose faith in her job:

Honestly, working in private language institutes is just drudgery. Of course, if the conditions in the institute improved, I would teach full-time because I have a passion for teaching. However, I don't like working hard to materialize another person's dreams. I have my own dreams. My fiancé is going to migrate to a foreign country, and I am also going to apply for a Ph.D. in English literature and teach there. I've heard that teachers are paid a lot more in foreign countries (I10).

Discussion

The emotion labor that Farzaneh experienced in the first institute due to managerial transgressions, which were evident in the rules and the division of labor of the institute's activity system, caused her to enact an I-Identity as an imposition, consequently lacking enough motivation to forge an A-Identity. Farzaneh was also restricted by her N-Identity in the institute since, as a young woman in Iranian society, she was forbidden to wear nail polish or noticeable make-up when attending the institute, which was mainly patronized by male teenage language learners. More importantly, the prohibition of taking cellphones to class, which could otherwise serve as a fruitful mediational tool for teachers (Johnson & Golombek, 2016), was in sharp contrast to Farzaneh's professional beliefs, hence intensifying her emotion labor. In fact, the manager at the first language institute not only meddled in Farzaneh and her colleagues' teaching style but also in their personal affairs, ultimately causing her to leave the institute. This echoes Alsup's (2006) contention that teachers choose to stay in the profession to the extent that their professional identity is in harmony with their personal identity. Farzaneh's quitting the institute also resembles Valerie, a novice Singaporean English teacher in Loh and Liew (2016) who contemplated leaving her job when she felt that the school leadership did not appreciate her efforts. This made Valerie physically ill, resulting in lowering her teaching standards to keep her sanity. Although Farzaneh experienced emotion labor, she seldom took agentive actions to improve work conditions while teaching at the first institute. However, some scholars (e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2013) have argued that leaving the institute, as in Farzaneh's case, could be considered another manifestation of agency.

In her second institute, although Farzaneh was not paid a generous salary, the favorable activity system not only prevented the potential emotion labor from emerging but also helped her enact her desired LTI. In other words, she felt satisfied with her I-Identity, and the favorable atmosphere at the institute encouraged her to forge an A-Identity, resulting in "faithful" feelings toward the institute. This resonates with Benesch and Prior's (2023) recent contention that teachers could be motivated to forge their best selves in an emotionally pleasant workplace. Similarly, this finding corroborates the positive effects of finding meaning, fulfillment, and happiness on language teachers' emotions and well-being, even in cases where salary is below expectations (Talbot & Mercer, 2018).

In the third institute, however, Farzaneh's perceived contradictions led to her debilitating emotion labor and, subsequently, her identity dilemma. The main sources of her

emotion labor boiled down to two core categories, namely the profit-oriented policy of the institute, and performance-constraining factors (shown in Figure 1). In what follows, we explain each factor separately.

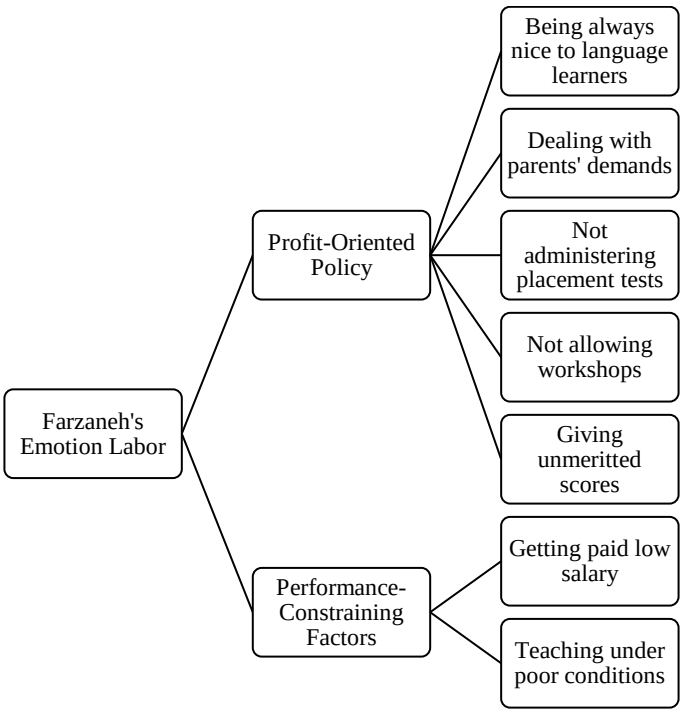

Figure 1. *Factors Contributing to Farzaneh's Emotion Labor in the Third Institute*

Profit-Oriented Policy

Farzaneh was on the brink of emotion labor in her third institute following a briefing session in which the manager asked the teachers to be nice to language learners even if they would not study enough or misbehave. The feeling rules of the new institute were in conflict with Farzaneh's professional beliefs, which caused her to perceive that her teacher-authority was shrinking. Her perceived diminishing authority was validated by several encounters she had with the parents, who badgered her into assigning less homework, being lenient with cheating, and allowing unqualified children to sit at upper levels. This matches Gao's (2017) argument that due to the marketization of education, parents and students have been recently given great leeway to criticize teachers' instruction. Farzaneh's dissatisfaction with the institute's feeling rules mirrors that of Maltese English teachers in Mercer (2020), who reported that they were recruited for their institute's profit-making. The teachers occasionally perceived language learners' demands to be so much in conflict with their professional beliefs that they described what they were engaged in as "business versus teaching" (p. 9).

Another implicit rule of the institute which intensified Farzaneh's emotion labor was the manager's reluctance to administer placement tests, resulting in crowded heterogeneous classes. Perhaps, from the manager's perspective, assigning language learners to their actual proficiency level through placement tests would have meant recruiting new teachers and paying a higher salary. In the same vein, research has shown that novice teachers feel overwhelmed by substantial workloads due to being assigned to heterogeneous classes (see Ashton, 2020). In addition, the manager's disagreement with a workshop for elementary students on the grounds that "it would interrupt class schedules," aggravated Farzaneh's emotion labor. Farzaneh's disappointment with the manager's decision resembles one of the teachers in Mercer (2020), who disapproved of the priority of making money over language learning in her institute.

Yet another serious contradiction that Farzaneh perceived in the division of labor of the institute's activity system was the manager's insistence on giving a passing score to even unqualified language learners—according to Farzaneh, "for more tuition fees". Although Farzaneh resisted this client-favored assessment rule alone, her colleagues did not show the slightest agency to resist this unfavorable rule, perhaps because teaching was their only source of income, and they did not want to risk losing their jobs—a situation that has been previously recorded by Nazari and Molana (2022). Despite the fact that Farzaneh's emotion labor prompted her to exercise her agency by resisting the institute's scoring rule several times, these agentive efforts were not enough. Accordingly, she enacted an I-Identity as an imposition by repeatedly justifying her presence at the institute as a way of collecting data for her MA thesis. Also, she almost ceased to invest in forging an A-Identity by describing teaching at a private language institute as "a drudgery". Farzaneh's disenchantment with her LTI at the institute resembles the feelings of frustration of a novice Iranian English teacher in Mirzaei and Aliakbari (2018) whose identity construction was derailed by his top managers' unreasonable demands of giving undeserved scores to unqualified students.

Performance-Constraining Factors

Other rules of the institute were in stark contrast to Farzaneh's preferences, thus inflicting emotion labor on her. For instance, Farzaneh repeatedly expressed her dissatisfaction with the low salary in return for meeting "too many dos and don'ts" within the institute. Her financial concern once again reflects that of the Maltese English teachers in Mercer (2020) who had to quit teaching because of the rising cost of living and ended up working in the gaming

industry. Also, having to teach ninety-minute classes nonstop had rendered Farzaneh exhausted. Emotional exhaustion was also reported by a veteran teacher in Mercer (2020), who expressed strong disapproval of the long teaching hours and no coffee or lunch break time. The above concerns bear witness to Benesch's (2020b) contention that teachers' financial difficulties and their overwork are potential sources of emotion labor that could disrupt their teaching.

Additionally, continuing to teach in dilapidated institute buildings under poor conditions, albeit not immediately perceived as emotion labor, could inadvertently transform into malignant rules of the activity system, severely affecting teacher well-being and LTI construction, as acknowledged by Mbagwu (2023). Farzaneh's frustration with the noisy window air-conditioner, distracting dirty classroom walls, lack of a coffee maker in the staff room, and cramped classrooms validate this argument. Similar to Farzaneh's experience, Nigerian teachers in Mbagwu (2023) expressed dissatisfaction with teaching in buildings of poor quality and cramped classrooms, which affected their teaching effectiveness and made them feel disrespected and unappreciated.

All in all, the emotion labor stemming from the contradictions that Farzaneh perceived in almost all nodes of the institute's activity system, namely the rules, community, the division of labor, and the outcome, as shown by the lighting-shaped arrows in Figure 2, undermined her motivation to forge robust I- and A-Identities. Finally, comparing her ideal activity system with the unfavorable activity system of the institute where the prioritization of profit-making over teaching English continued to be a major source of emotion labor, caused Farzaneh to contemplate quitting her current workplace.

Although Farzaneh's colleagues also nursed a grievance against the unfavorable rules of the institute, they were not as agentive as she was. In other words, her colleagues' actions largely remained at the level of suggestion. This supports the fact that agency is best enacted collectively (Benesch, 2018; Feryok, 2012). More importantly, Farzaneh and her colleagues, despite enjoying a good rapport in the staff room, did not harness the potential of that like-minded community to ameliorate the rules of their institute—unlike the ILI teachers in Nazari and Karimpour (2022) who jointly resisted a teaching policy prescribed by their institute. In fact, the manager's imperviousness to suggestions, coupled with Farzaneh and her colleagues' half-hearted agentive attempts, prevented the resolution of ongoing contradictions through expansive learning (Figure 2), hence the failure to reconstruct the institute's activity system (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

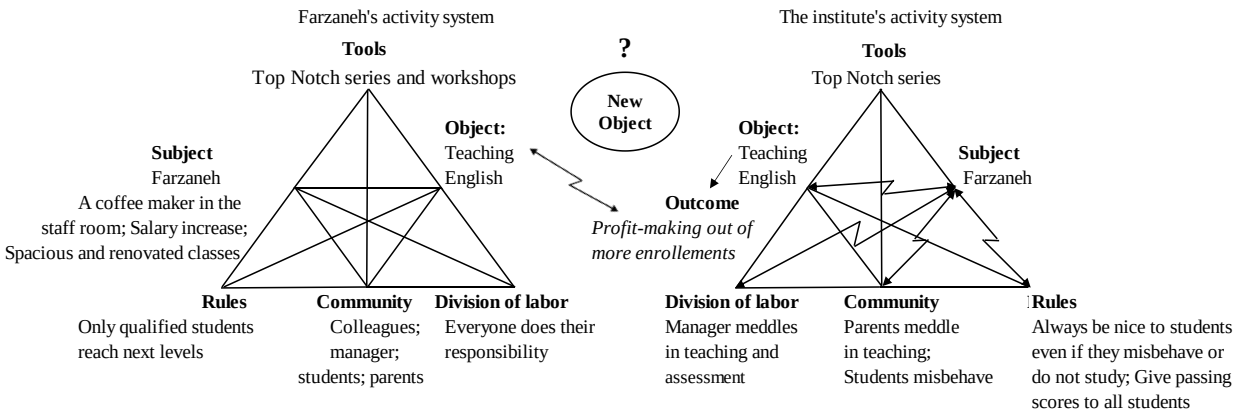

Figure 2. *Unresolved Contradictions in Farzaneh's Third Institute and her Persistent Emotion Labor*

Conclusion

This study recorded the teaching trajectory of a novice Iranian female EFL teacher at three private language institutes with the aim of exploring how her emotion labor affected her language teacher agency and identity. Findings revealed that Farzaneh quit teaching in the first institute due to the tensions emanating from the emotion labor that she experienced. In contrast, the emotionally favorable activity system of the second institute helped her forge I- and A-Identities. However, the growing contradictions that she perceived in the third institute caused her enormous emotion labor once again, rendering her ambivalent about staying in her job.

A major source of the emotion labor that negatively affected Farzaneh's LTI in her third institute was the profit-making policy that came at the expense of educating qualified language learners. In other words, the goal of the activity system used to be teaching English which was gradually transformed into a tacit outcome of having more student enrollments. Additionally, the institute's feeling rules of pleasing the students under any conditions further intensified her emotion labor. Despite the fact that Farzaneh resisted the unfavorable grading rules of the institute several times, her unaided agentive actions did not pay off, resulting in her imminent resignation from the third institute.

Farzaneh's imminent job resignation has an important implication for the owners and managers of private language institutes. Although businesses worldwide are believed to create affinity groups consisting of their staff for the sake of making more profit (Gee, 2000), we can argue that this bond would not pay dividends without investing in the well-being of the employees—in the context of this study, language teachers. We are aware that private

language institutes in Iran are self-financed, and some managers are struggling to keep their institutes afloat in the country's ailing economy. However, it is vital to ensure that the basic needs and expectations of teachers are met (Pentón Herrera, Martínez-Alba & Trinh, 2023), as this will boost their motivation and increase their commitment to and performance in the institute. For example, as seen in this study, providing a coffee maker for teachers to use during their break time, permitting workshops for young learners, giving a salary increase, and allowing for placement tests could have prompted Farzaneh to construct strong I- and A-Identities. This reflects Benesch and Prior's (2023) concern that teachers are not supposed to continue shouldering the burden of their emotion labor; rather, the institutions should turn into more pleasant and "better functioning places" (p. 8) so that novice teachers like Farzaneh could easily enact their desired LTI (i.e., enjoying the smooth application of their pedagogical knowledge).

We encourage the academic community to build on these findings and explore in future studies the ways language teachers can hold their (private language) institutions accountable for creating emotionally-pleasant work conditions that facilitate their teaching and promote their well-being. Perhaps, grassroots initiatives at the institute level, which lead to various outcomes such as requests, petitions, and strikes, would improve inauspicious work conditions. Thus, prospective researchers could investigate how collective agentive actions, like going on strike, could make a difference in their teaching contexts. Relatedly, the topic of which emotion regulation strategies afford novice language teachers more resilience to cope with the initial frustration emanating from their emotion labor and then help them enact their agency, remains fertile in academia.

Future studies could replicate this study by conducting focus group interviews with language teachers working at private language institutes to learn about how they approach their emotion labor. Finally, just as exploring Sela's imagined teacher identity in Barkhuizen (2016), Farzaneh's imagined LTI could also be investigated some years later as she harbored the ambition to start a Ph.D. and then apply for a teaching position abroad, to see in what ways her emotion labor contributes to her professional development and learning.

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