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# Iranian novice English teachers' agency construction: the complexity dynamic/system perspective

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**Abstract**

This study drew on qualitative research and focused on the exercise of agency among the novice English teachers in the Iranian context. Fifteen novice English teachers who have been teaching English in private language institutes in Baneh, Iran were invited through snowball sampling. The analyses of semi-structured and focus group interviews, from the complexity dynamic/system perspective, revealed that teachers practice agency employing dialogic feedback, positioning, and critical incidents. The results further indicated that teachers made a learning community to make the right decision, predict future incidents, and develop their professional agency. The analyses provide implications for the policymakers, teacher educators, and curriculum designers to construct a better opportunity for beginning teachers to become highly-qualified in their careers.

**Keywords:** Teacher agency, Beginning teacher, Complexity theory, Thematic analysis

## Introduction

Iranian English major graduate students have more chances to find a job, commonly as a teacher than other humanities sub majors. So, a large number of university students apply for English language majors. In addition, Academic training is not comprehensively sufficient to regard graduate students as professional teachers. Consequently, the novice teachers are required to practice teaching and learn from their experiences so that they manifest themselves as professional teachers. In this study, we concentrated on the beginning teachers to find out how they constructed a sense of agency and professionalism in their teaching community.

Agency is the capacity of individuals to initiate intentional acts (Bandura, 2006). Since teacher agency is related to the agency of others (Wallen and Tormey, 2019), we seek to find how the beginning teachers hold the capacity to learn from others (stakeholders, colleagues, peers, social media, and school principals); and whether looking for professionalism fosters the professional agency or not. The context of this study is Iranian female English teachers who are teaching in private English institutes for less than 18 months. We conceptualized the complexity dynamic/system theory (CDST) of agency (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016; Larsen-

Freeman, 2017) as our main theoretical framework to consider how teachers enact agency in their teaching community.[1] We made sense of the complex dynamics of interaction in which the system of learning from peers and teacher practice are co-nested (Davis and Sumara, 2006). Based on the objectives of the current study, we try to reach the answer to the following research questions:

1- Which stakeholders do participants perceive to hold agency?
2- How do the beginning teachers recognize their agency during the process of dialogue?
3- How do the beginning teachers position themselves, and how does such positioning interact with their agency?
4- How critical incidents contribute to developing a sense of agency?

## Literature review

Agency is linked to goals and includes act according to the choices (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004); intentional efforts to affect and make differences (Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, & Mahlakaarto, 2017); reflective action into solving the identified problem (Parker, 2016). The exercise of agency mediates the community of teaching in which the beginning teachers attempt to solve their concerns. The capacity for acting exercise is attainable when the teachers take an agentic position. Some scholars probed teacher agency in the view of positioning (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Roger and Wetzel, 2013). According to Kayi-Aydar (2015), teacher agency is multi-faceted and context-bounded. Understanding how teachers position themselves concerning the context they teach contributes to finding the challenges that teachers meet in their teaching practices.

In this study, the teachers practice agency through dialogic feedback. Teachers are positioned as agentic to give (experienced teachers) and receive (novice teachers) feedback. Charteris and Smardon (2015) studied how teacher discourse supports agency as opportunities for decision making and reclaim professionalism. They found that dialogic feedback fosters decision making in the way of improving students learning and afford "repertoires of maneuver" (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley & Miller, 2012, p.36). Decision making leaks from the dialogic feedback and gives the teachers the potentiality of the act according to the inferences.

All scholars have emphasized the outstanding role that critical incidents play in directing agency among teachers. For example, Hiver and whitehead (2018) conducted a case study research and found out how critical incidents were associated with meaning-making due to much cognitive effort needed for the participants to resolve the problems. Hiver & Al-Hoorie (2016) tried to find the role of critical incidents in shaping identity and making agency. By doing a single case study, He realized that critical incidents in the participant's life accelerated enacting agency on the way of re-authoring identity. Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) probed the critical incidents among EAP teachers. The results of their study revealed that critical incidents gave insights to the EAP teachers to face and use strategies in coping with problems. Operators of

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[1]We employ this term in our paper to refer to where the beginning teachers teach and/or learn from.

critical incidents act in a complex dynamic environment (Casse and Caroly, 2019) to predict future problems and enact agency professionally.

## Conceptual framework

In the current study, we adopted the complexity dynamic/system theory as our main conceptual framework (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, 2017) to investigate the complexity of interactions among novice teachers. We derived our outline from the blueprint of (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016) study to conceptualize the dynamic perspective of teacher agency in developing their deliberate actions.

Complex dynamic system theory (CDST) is a meta-theory that does not dictate a unique methodology (Byrne, 2011); it is grounded in phenomenological reality, and encourages innovation in perceiving complex social phenomena (Manson, 2001). There is no shortage of applying methods in CDST (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016). Thus our study is compatible with CDST as we are looking for an ontological and epistemological view of beginning teachers to perceive how they practice their professional agency. Through research questions, data collection, and analysis, we further concentrate on emergent outcomes that evolve.

*System*, as it is noted by Hiver & Al-Hoorie (2016), is the basic unit of analysis, and in case it reflects the complexity of the social world, it is named a complex system. The system under investigation in our research is novice teachers' exercise of their agency during 1 year and a half of the teaching practice. Based on the criteria that de Bot &Larsen–Freeman (2011) defined for the complex system, our research has phenomenological validity and adapted feedback from stakeholders. It is considered complex because of the existence of close interaction among two groups of experienced and novice teachers, principals, and parents. According to what Al-Hoorie (2015) defined, we positioned the beginning teachers who act independently and intentionally as the *agent* of the system.

Regarding the *level of granularity* for data collection and as a temporal window, we focused on shaping professional agency among the beginning teachers who have started teaching for 18 months. The data were analyzed thematically to explore both inter- and intra-individual complexity of the development and acting. Since the main goal of the complexity theory is not probing the whole system, the researchers narrowed the level of their research area to shaping and exercising agency of the only preliminary English teachers with limited experience.

A system is an indispensable part of the context (Mercer, 2016), and *context* is an integral part of the investigating system (Ushioda, 2015). The contextual factors of agents in the current study encompass graduation in B. A course and the training that participants had received during their academic studies in English sub majors. The factors that facilitate the behavior, interactions, and adaption of agents are leading to a better outcome and change. CDST, as a nomological network, manifests and links phenomenological specifications and theoretical structures of a study. In our survey, the academic instructions, the intra-interactions among the beginning teachers, and their inter-interaction with the experienced teachers and principals in the same teaching community and with other teachers, e.g., at social networks, have made a *systemic and dynamic network* in which its systems are phenomenologically bounded (Carolan, 2014).

The key feature of the complex system is the gradual or dynamic change that contributes to the emergent outcome. For the *dynamic process* of how and why the system got here and where it goes (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016, p.7), the agents, through three themes of feedback, positioning, and critical incidents, take advantage of changes and reconstruct the network and connections (Holland, 2012) with the stakeholders. To trace the causal complexity of the system, the change and development of agency among the beginning teachers is observable and conferred. They function more professionally in contrast to their first days of teaching. The performance can be thought of as the *emergent outcome* that is steady during teaching practice.

In our qualitative research, we dealt with the dynamic *interaction* of components and systems rather than variables. Whenever the components interact, there is complexity (Vallacher, Van Greet, & Nowak, 2015). The interaction of components manifests in the behavior of participants, gives lifeblood to the system, and contributes to developing the components dynamically. *Order parameters* are specifications that determine change and behavior in a system (Haken, 1997), reduce the interaction of components (Gaustello & Liebovitch, 2009), and influence the desired outcome (Morrison, 2012). *Control parameters* are values of a system that effect change in outcome (Haken, 2009), mainly when researchers intentionally induce changes in the system. As a considerable task, CDST tries to determine which control parameter the system is sensitive to. The determination can be considered as a great way to find the "motors of change" (Larsen–Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 70). In the current study, the background literacy of the teachers and the input in the forms of feedback or advice are regarded as order (constraint) parameters that limit the interaction among the English teachers. Moreover, the parameters like the degree of motivation and sense of competition among the beginning teachers are viewed as control (driving). These parameters are in control of agents and can be designed in a way that moves toward obtaining the desired outcome, acting professionally.

## Methodology

### Participants

Fifteen novice English teachers who have been teaching English in private language institutes in Baneh, Iran were invited through snowball sampling (see Table 1 for more information on the participants). The lead researcher asked the administrators of some English language institutes to introduce the beginning teachers who are teaching at their private schools for less than a year and a half. Then they were called by the first researcher to attend the interviews. Most of the teachers have been teaching in two or three private English institutes. Some of them have been teaching at the same private schools. During the call, the participants questioned about their teaching experience to ensure homogeneity. The participants were also asked to introduce more beginning teachers to attend the interviews. At the first meeting, the participants were informed of the intent of the research, and they were assured that the data would be kept confidential. All of the interviewees were female and holding B. A in English language majors that were considered as an order parameter in CDST. Participation was unpaid and voluntary and they could withdraw anytime, during or after the project. However, no one resigned. All the participants were L1 Kurdish language speakers. They attended

**Table 1** Demographic Information of the Participants

| Row | Pseudonym | Gender | Major | degree | Months of teaching experience | The number of institutes they are teaching |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Zhila | Female | English teaching | B.A | 15 | 3 |
| 2 | Samira | Female | Translation studies | B.A | 17 | 2 |
| 3 | Zhikal | Female | English teaching | B.A | 12 | 2 |
| 4 | Negar | Female | English literature | B.A | 14 | 3 |
| 5 | Nian | Female | Translation studies | B.A | 15 | 2 |
| 6 | Zara | Female | English teaching | B.A | 15 | 2 |
| 7 | Shapol | Female | English literature | B.A | 8 | 3 |
| 8 | Helen | Female | English teaching | B.A | 13 | 1 |
| 9 | Shiwa | Female | English literature | B.A | 14 | 1 |
| 10 | Srwe | Female | English teaching | B.A | 13 | 2 |
| 11 | Rojin | Female | English teaching | B.A | 18 | 1 |
| 12 | Maria | Female | English literature | B.A | 18 | 3 |
| 13 | Glare | Female | Translation studies | B.A | 13 | 2 |
| 14 | Razhan | Female | English literature | B.A | 16 | 1 |
| 15 | Delshad | Female | English teaching | B.A | 18 | 1 |

in a semi-structured interview individually. To conduct focus group interviews, they were put in three groups of six, five, and four. Grouping the participants was based on the time that they were convenient with it. The researchers preferred to use pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

### Data collection

To cognize what and how participants express their views, two types of data were collected. First, the lead researcher did semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each interview lasted 30 min approximately. Secondly, in order to understand how interviewees respond to each other's views, we established focus group interviews. To avoid complexity in the data analysis, three groups of four, five, and six beginning teachers were established. Peek and Fothergill (2009) reported that smaller groups, including three to five participants, run more smoothly. In a focus group interview, the researcher plays the role of a moderator or facilitator (Bryman, 2014). In the current research, the moderator set and managed the discussion to elucidate the participants' perceptions of making agency. Each focus group discussion lasted between 50 min and 1 hour. The moderator asked the participants questions about the interactions with peers in their teaching community. Some of the interview questions are presented in Table 2. Some other follow-up questions emerged from the interviewee's responses during the interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Afterward, the transcribed data were checked with the participants to validate the data.

### Data analysis

Based on the objectives of the qualitative study, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted. In line with the research design, the researchers read the

**Table 2** Interview questions

1- How do you receive and give feedback with your colleagues? To what extent was it effective?

2- Have you established a teacher community? How does it improve your professionalism?

3- How do you evaluate the environment of your teaching place as a developmental facilitator?

5- What kind of relationship do you have with the administration?

6- To what degree do you find that the principals have contributed to developing your professional agency?

7- Do your colleagues and administrator see you (treat you) as a professional?

8- To what degree do you find that school practice has contributed to developing your professional agency?

9- What are your thoughts on the roles and responsibilities of a teacher?

transcribed data thoroughly to gain a detailed understanding of the data. Next, each researcher coded transcribed data individually in order to establish inter-coder reliability (Armstrong et al., 1997). Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to help the researchers to code and identify themes (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Researchers compared the open codes and decided on some major codes like 'break-time interaction', 'on-line teacher group', 'expert principals', and 'classroom problems' as the axial codes. Then at the broader level, the selective codes collated into themes. The researchers refined the themes concerning the complexity theoretical framework of the study. The codes can be developed a priori (before) or posteriori (after) data collection (Saldaña, 2013). Having formed the gap of agency construction among novice teachers, the researchers decided on the interview questions. As Adair and Pastori (2010) argue creating qualitative coding frameworks depends on a balance between outsider and insider knowledge, decisions about interpretation and practical compromises about labels and meanings (p.32). After analyzing the data from the interviews, to give it more validity the, researchers coded the data individually. The analyzed data generated three themes. Accordingly, the researchers consented on three outstanding themes of dialogical feedback, positioning and critical incidents. The researchers could not consent on more or fewer themes from the collected data.

Finally, the themes *dialogic feedback, positioning, and critical incidents* have emerged. To increase the credibility of analyses, the participants gave their views and suggestions on initial codes and generated themes (see Fig. 1).

## Results

This section explores the beginning teachers' attitudes toward shaping their agency and teaching practices. It represents the factors that bring about changes in their professional activities through the themes of *dialogic feedback, positioning,* and *critical incidents.* The emerged themes seem to shape the beginning teachers' agency and their teaching practices.

### Theme 1; dialogic feedback

Teachers take dialogic feedback for granted that it reinforces their teaching practices. The beginning teachers asserted that they needed to act, the core concept of agency, in favor of teaching principles and methodologies that have been theorized in academic books. The subsequent records are samples of reflections between the beginning

**Fig. 1** The model of teacher agency among the novice teachers
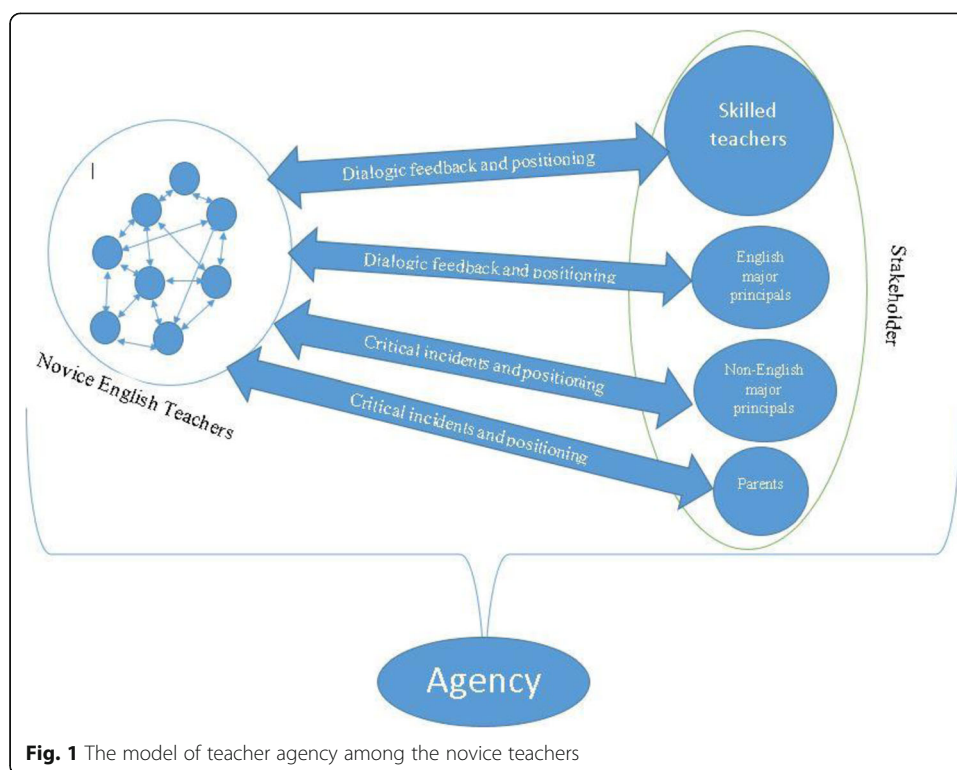
teachers and the more experienced teachers in a teaching community illustrating teacher agency.

*Collective feedback* was an emergent selective code that was perceived in the interviews. The teachers were satisfied with this feedback type that runs dialogically to strengthen their agency, as Zhila says;

> The more experienced teachers are reluctant to give bits of advice individually as they do not want to lose time on sharing their ideas. However, when teachers are sitting around, frequently in break time, they give feedback on methodologies that we as beginning teachers apply in our classes. Their feedbacks are along with alternative recommendations that can improve the teaching act.

She elaborates that peers' feedback helps to clarify the issue while colleagues are giving feedback collectively. She adds that this type of interaction enables us to be more agentic.

*Digital feedback* was another term assigned as a selective code after the participants mentioned the kind of interaction via on-line applications like Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp. The teachers manifested deep contentment of collaborating with peers in their convenient time and place. The interviewees declared that they do not experience to act, but they act to experience via association with experienced teachers everywhere and every when. Hanie describes the significance of her efforts:

> *When my colleagues asked me to join a page on Instagram for English language teachers, I could not imagine the extent of its impact on promoting our professional agency. I try to act and apply the methods that are offered and practiced on the page. When I see the positive results of the techniques, my self-confidence rises.*

Samira exercises agency similarly to what she derives from the reflection of a group of teachers on telegram application. She declares *the pros and cons of a specific technique that group members share, direct me to make a better decision on how and when applying the skill.* The teachers declared that they were better able to innovate the ways of teaching and interacting in the classroom environment after they went through the posts demonstrating on-line.

*Principals' role was* another code that interviewees asserted during the data collection process. The participants classified the English institute principals to two groups of non-English-educated and English-educated ones. They called non-English major principals as managers that only control the school environment and engage in maintaining the discipline of the schools. On the other hand, principals who held university degrees in the English language are labeled as facilitators and instructors. As some of the beginning teachers went to the same English institutes with the two sorts of administrators, they had wholly consented to the differences between the two groups of administrators. They prioritized the principals whose major was English at college. For example, Zhikal maintains;

> *The principal of the English institute that I am teaching holds a Ph.D. in TEFL. He is a facilitator who shifts the school to the community of teaching practice in a way that we feel relaxed in posing questions and problems. Occasionally, he observes my teaching methods and gives me feedback in private. The feedback goes dialogically by asking my viewpoint and reasons. He helps all the teachers to make professional contributions in taking up an agentic position. His interactive feedbacks are so comprehensible that I prefer to consult him rather than searching in methodological books.*

A few participants were complaining about discrimination between novice and experienced teachers from administrators that have led to perceive their identity lower than other colleagues.

### Theme 2; positioning

All the beginning teachers positioned themselves as enthusiastic teachers who had the potential of teaching effectively. They believed that learners deserve professional teachers, and they were stepping into the way of becoming experienced teachers.

*Self-positioning in relation to colleagues* was the key selective code that participants voiced in the interviews. They expressed that they were considered as *novice* teachers, not regular teachers in the community of teachers; consequently, they were not self-confident to give feedbacks to the issues which teachers were discussing in the break times. Negar clarifies more;

> *It is a fact that we are not as proficient as experienced teachers; as a result, the experienced teachers are reluctant to ask for our opinions on particular issues under negotiating. Neither can we give useful feedback nor dare to involve ourselves in dialogs. Nevertheless, other novice teachers and I are trying to develop our proficiency in the same way other teachers did.*

Since there are a few beginning teachers at the English schools, they reposition themselves as capable teachers and try to enact agency and achieve the goal of gaining the position of the skilled teachers.

*Self-positioning in relation to administrators* was another code emerged from the data. In this case, interviewees did not compare themselves with their peers; they reflected the administrators' views and how they were positioned from the English institute principals' visions. The teachers pointed out that the way they were positioned is in close relationships with the English language graduate principals. Nian, who had the experience of teaching in different English schools at the time of doing the interview, got into more details;

> *It is a fact that we are novice teachers, and administrators have accepted us like that, but the position we feel is different from English- educated principals to non-English-educated ones. English- major principals evaluate both teachers and learners, give positive feedback so that we feel getting progress. They are reshaping our agency and professional identity and promoting our self-efficacy. However, non-English-educated principals are incapable of evaluating their teachers, so some times they ask for learners' views about our teaching. They like us to feel that we are under control. I undergo myself as a worker rather than a teacher while I notice this type of behavior.*

The participants believed that the way the English institute administrators positioned them would affect not only the learners and their parents' attitudes but also teachers' efforts to enact and practice teaching.

*Self-positioning in relation to the non-English teachers* was an additional selective code that encourages beginning teachers to act dissimilarly with the subject matter teachers. Primarily, they mentioned the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach that shows the potentiality of English teachers in teaching other subjects in English. They assumed that society sees English teachers in a higher position in comparison with other teachers. They call English teachers more open-minded due to the fact that they are familiar with another culture. They confirmed that Language and culture are interwoven, and they can quickly adapt themselves to the target culture. Zara declares, '*I am an English teacher*' in response to people's questions about her job. She hopes to go abroad to practice the language as a merit of being an English teacher. In reply to how English teaching enables agency in contrast to the subject matter teachers, Shapol positioned herself as an active and modern teacher and states;

> *I can search in foreign websites, courses, and webinars to enact as the new methods that are presented; nevertheless, there is probable that non-English teachers do not*

*have enough English language proficiency to search and listen to on-line presenta-*
*tions and get the benefit of them.*

**Theme 3; critical incidents**

Unpredictable events in the classroom environment normally convey disagreeing and undesirable implications. Teachers enact agency while trying to make the decision about the critical incidents both cognitively and effectively. The following narrated critical incidents indicate the negative emotional effect on the teachers. However, they exercise agency to gain positive results in the end.

Critical incident 1: *"My son has not learned anything. What are you doing in the classroom?"* Helen is teaching to young learners and pre-intermediate classes in a private English institute. She has been teaching for two semesters to the class that incident happened. At the end of the semester, the father of a student complains angrily about not learning of his son. He growled; *"I send my son and pay a lot of fees so that he would be able to learn and can speak English. But he can't speak even a word in English. What are you doing with your students?"* Her teacher, Helen, explained the case that his son was a good student previously, but he has changed a lot in the last 3 weeks, and his progress was too slow. She reminded his father whether he had bought anything like a gadget that was more interesting for his son than his lessons. The learner's father claimed that he had bought a new tablet for his son a month before and his son would spent time with it. The father promised to control his son more and apologized if he had insulted the teacher. Helen enacts responsibility at school environment and concludes;

> *I have learned to be more responsible about the progress of my students. I must find the reason/s behind the learners' weaknesses. I will keep more in touch with parents in the future. Now I know that I could use the student's tablet in favor of his English lessons, for example, download him learning games and puzzles.*

Critical incident 2: *"why are the students shouting in the classroom? Why your class is so noisy?"* Shiwa is teaching young learners at the elementary level. Once there were 15 students in her first teaching semester. Students liked doing TPR activities and made much noise. She asked them to be quiet, but they restarted making noise soon.

Meanwhile, the administrator knocked on the door and went into class. Students stopped noising promptly. He exclaimed, *"Why can't you make students quiet? How can you teach the class?"* then he turned to the students and warned them to be quiet. Shiwa felt the shame of the incident and expressed how he enacted later;

> *I posed the problem to the school colleagues. They recommended useful strategies. Moreover, I studied a chapter of a methodological book on how to manage the class. Now I have plan and strategies to engage learners into action and control the class better than before."*

Both autobiographical incidents assert that the teachers can enact agency to exercise teaching practice in their teaching community. Agency exercise redirects the beginning

teachers to move from negative and insulting feelings toward great outcomes and experiences.

## Discussion

Our findings go in line with Dotger and McQuitty's (2014) study that teaching systems are complex and change to the system occurs by implying multiple concepts and topics in teacher education. Make connections between the various parts of the system will foster the interrelationship between practice and idea (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Dotger & McQuitty, 2014) in the given system. The ties between two groups of experienced and novice teachers can be explained through complexity theory. Since we have a macro view of our findings, there is no possibility in the domain of our target to scrutinize other aspects of the system e.g., needs and psycho-constructs. In this article, we focused on the way that the beginning English teachers enact agency in their teaching community. In the driven data through the analyses of the focus group and individual in-depth interviews, three dominant themes emerged; *dialogical feedback, positioning,* and *critical incidents*. The participants are teaching in private English institutes in which the textbooks are different from those of public schools. English textbooks in Iranian schools mainly reflect the culture and values of Iran while English institutes books portray cross-cultural differences and universal values. Thus, there are no worries for the researchers to consider the cultural and ideological views of the teachers and their impact on teaching methods or practices. Rather, teachers at English institutes are more competitive to act better than public school teachers whom their permanent employment is finalized.

Like any other complex dynamic system, teacher agency can be conceptualized through the interdependent of agents in the learning environment. The practice of agency leads to learning and exploring teacher identity (Garner & Kaplan, 2019). Moreover, conceptualizing teacher agency and teacher identity through CDST encourages the researchers to study new approaches to research and practice adjoining language teaching and teachers (Mercer, 2016). The exercise of agency occurs in complex classroom practice (Tao & Gao, 2017) in a way to enact the goal of teachers (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016). In our study teacher agency came out in line with what Toom et al., (2015) state as complex negotiation between teachers' identity and context.

The beginning teachers exercise agency through *dialogic feedback* and conversation with peers, colleagues, and English-educated administrators in order to be considered as professional teachers. The collaborations among teachers occur not only in their teaching milieu but also in the online community. The permanent and close interaction of the beginning teachers is assumed as a complex system in which novice teachers narrate their methodologies and weak points. In return, they receive comments and feedback from more experienced teachers. Some principals teach English in their private institutes too, so the beginning teachers are eager to interact with and receive feedback from them as well. The capacity of colleagues (Charteris and Smardon, 2015) is a social element that facilitated communication among teachers. The capacity of the beginning teachers (e.g., trust, the courage of pose) and the capacity of their peers (e.g., experience, skills) smoothed sharing the ideas and attitudes of the teachers in their teaching community. The beginning teachers, in their complex system of the learning community, learn from the experienced ones and make decisions to enact as they

exercised in their classrooms. The teachers co-construct the environment and co-learn from peers to shape a professional agency.

In accordance with the *positioning* theme, the data analyses demonstrate that the participants made positioning in relation to colleagues, principals, and the subject matter teachers. In line with the concept of the complexity theory, the interaction between system and component is dynamic, and the novice teachers position themselves in the interaction between self and others (Arvaja, 2016; Dennen, 2014). The teachers' positioning is considered in two views; both higher and lower identity and agency. That is, English major principals value them, and they see themselves in a higher position than the non-English teachers. However, the non-English major principals and skilled colleagues do not regard them in a high position of agency and identity. The (de) valuation affects the epistemological view and making agency of the participants. When the beginning teachers are valued, they consider themselves caring and more responsible; they find the inner capacity to act more effectively. A sense of agency makes people take concrete action to reach their goals (Duff, 2012), and it is intertwined with positioning and identity in a complex way (Kayi-Aydar, 2015); thus, teachers need positive attention and trust to perform to achieve a better position.

Rex and Schiller (2009) maintain that "people do not want to participate in conditions where they feel devalued and powerless" (p. 21). It is essential to notice that undervaluation causes teachers to underestimate their capacity to be a better teacher or position themselves as a non-agentic teacher. Consequently, there is the possibility of deficiency or quitting the job. Nian, a beginning English teacher who experiences teaching in two English institutes, underestimates herself as a worker at an English school with the non-English major principal while she feels agentic and fighting for acting better with English major principals.

Moreover, critical incidents have a significant role in igniting a sense of agency (Hiver & Al-Hoorie 2016). Drawing on complexity theory, analyses show how incidental parameters perform as a 'motor of change' (Larsen–Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 70) and have an effect on teachers' behavior. When the participants came across unpredictable incidents, they attempted to calm the site and time of occurrences. In the first critical incident, a father was dissatisfied with his son's progress. Helen made an agency by thinking of a system of close relationships with parents. She also interacted with experienced teachers and decided to use students' favorite things, gadgets, or toys, in favor of their progress. She has learned from the occurrence to enact better and more professionally to predict and block such happenings in the future.

In the second critical incident, Shiwa feels the stress of being blamed by the administrator about not controlling the class well. She has a phenomenological view of the unwanted occurrences and tries to change her behavior in line with making the class a better environment for learning. She exercises agency by receiving feedback from her colleagues. Her practice of agency was strengthened by selecting a useful book on how to manage a class and employ the instructions for controlling the class.

Teacher educators must be aware of the obstacles the beginning teachers might encounter during their teaching practices. Teacher educators need to strengthen the agentic power of the teachers, make them familiar with the techniques and the ways of managing the teaching environment, and how to act more skillfully.

## Conclusion, recommendation, and implications

Many studies have been done on how teacher agency is constructed and understood. Scholars have commonly investigated teacher agency from one perspective. In the current research, emergent themes directed the researchers to explore how English language novice teachers practice agency through three broad perspectives of dialogical feedback, positioning, and critical incidents. The researchers have decided to apply the Complexity Dynamic System Theory as a well-situated conceptual framework for the reason that it enables the researchers to examine the ways that beginning teachers as active agents interact with other members of the same system. The interactions contribute the teachers to exercise agency in a way that plays a significant role in dynamic changes and the development (Larsen Freeman, 2015, 2017) of the professional agency.

The data analyses revealed how the beginning teachers are trying to communicate with their peers, skilled colleagues, English-educated principals, and in social media channels (Instagram, telegram, and WhatsApp) in order to practice professionalism. The communication reshaped in the form of dialogic feedback to ease the process of learning and how to enact agency in the classrooms. The feedback can afford the beginning teachers to make the right decisions on how to act that leads to the best learning outcomes. In the current study, teachers are proactive in learning from experienced teachers and applying what they acquired through interaction and observation. The capacity that teachers have in posing problems and asking for solutions facilitated the process of interaction and learning. The learning environment for the beginning teachers from the experienced teachers and social media seems to be informal. There is a possibility for further research on interacting with the teachers in a formal gathering like scheduled classes of reflection. Moreover, the participants can change from beginning teachers to homogeneous, e.g., pre-service or experienced teachers in further studies. As the present study shows the feedback novice teachers receive in either form reinforces their instructional practices. The beginning teachers asserted that they needed to act, the core concept of agency, in favor of teaching principles and methodologies that have been theorized in academic books. This highlights the fact that such issues might be much more effective and charge a more desirable method for teachers' professional development. Instead of formal instruction in work-place or off-site courses for novice teachers, experienced teachers should be encouraged to provide feedback to their novice colleagues.

The researchers also found how the agency is exercised through positioning. The data were scrutinized to see how teachers represent themselves and being represented in the view of colleagues and principals. The way teachers positioned themselves is context-bounded. Realizing this matter helps the researchers to find the challenges that weaken teachers to make agency in their teaching environment. Positioning the agents is at the core of CDST. The participants in the current research enact agency whenever they were positioned with high identity; they were demotivated to act as far as they found themselves in lower identity in contrast to the experienced teachers. The present study shows that the members of the society view English teachers in a higher position in comparison with subject-matter teachers. They call English teachers more open-minded due to the fact that they are familiar with another culture. The fact enhances novice teachers' agency exercise unfold in a positive way. This is regarded as the bright side of the story of Iranian novice English teachers. Having thought in this way, the

teachers can stand other negative and dark sides of the agency formation and will grow in job satisfaction. However, the higher position of English teachers in the Iranian context can be attributed to the position of the English language in Iran. Learning English in Iran means you are connected and cool. It also is associated with prestige and modernity. Thus, there is an implication for teacher educators and curriculum designers to pay attention to threats that discourage teachers.

In this study, positioning was only examined in the view of the beginning teachers. There is a space for further study to explore how the beginning teachers are positioned in the view of the skilled colleagues and the principals of the institutes. One of the implications of the present study is the fact that discrimination between novice and experienced teachers on the part of the school and language institution administrators might lead to lower identity perceptions by novice teachers. From the very beginning of entering the profession, novice teachers should be informed that they have been regarded as professional teachers and teaching community position high and positive identity toward them. They should be informed that professionalism can be assumed as a process rather than a product. Novice teachers should be ensured that from the very beginning, they had started their journey to professionalism.

This study indicates that critical incident contributes to preventing the teachers from the happening of such occurrences during their teaching courses. Teachers negotiated the incidents in their teaching environment to learn from experience by setting a workplace of debate (Rocha et al., 2015). The results of the present study reveal that resolving critical incidents on the part of novice English teachers speeds up their enacting agency and enhances their moves toward professionalism. It also has a positive and motivating impact on their professional identity. This being the case, it is recommended that teacher educators incorporate materials on teacher education courses as to how to encounter and resolve critical incidents in the classroom as well as in the society. It is also hypothesized that treating critical incidents in a beneficial and positive manner might affect teachers' psychological well-being and job satisfaction. In the current study, we have just investigated how the beginning teachers reacted to the incidents and further study is suggested to explore the cognitive, emotional, and psychological aspects of critical incidents among the beginning teachers or practitioners. Moreover, there is a gap to probe how private institute principals confront critical incidents. Thus future qualitative and mixed-method studies can do research on the gap.

It is recommended that policy-makers and curriculum designers predict the incidents in the teaching community and suggest ways of dealing with the incidents beneficially.

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