



EFL Teachers' Organizational Identity in Online Communities: The Case of Iran

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Participation in different communities of practice forms and changes individuals' identities. Teachers' membership in language organizations is an example of such communities. Organizational identity (OI) affects how teachers act and position themselves in particular contexts. In the wake of emergency remote teaching, virtual environments have redefined the relationship between teachers and organizations. Although teacher identity construction has recently attracted a growing interest, studying teachers' OI has remained underexplored. In response to this paucity of research, the present study investigated how online teaching affects teachers' OI and what antecedents and consequences can explain their OI. This study adopted a qualitative design in which 14 teachers with high and low OIs were selected based on their answers to an OI questionnaire. Then, interviews were used and further analyzed qualitatively to examine the teachers' OI. The findings revealed that while OI appeared to have a paramount role in teachers' performances and emotions, transition to online environments negatively affected the teachers' OI. Several factors, instructional, institutional, and personal, served as the antecedents and barriers of OI. We offer several implications for teacher educators, administrators, and policymakers to cope with the challenges of virtual environments and facilitate the speed of transition to online teaching.

هویت سازمانی بر نحوه ی عملکرد و موضع گیری معلمان تاثیر می گذارد چرا که شرکت در اجتماعات کاری مختلف موجب شکل گیری و تغییر هویت افراد می شود. با پیدایش آموزش از راه دور، محیط مجازی ارتباط معلمان و سازمان ها را دچار دگرگونی کرده است. اگرچه شکل گیری هویت معلمان اخیراً توجه زیادی به خود جلب کرده است، هویت سازمانی معلمان همچنان مورد مطالعه قرار نگرفته است. بدین منظور مطالعه ی حاضر با اتخاذ رویکرد کیفی به بررسی هویت سازمانی 14 معلم زبان انگلیسی پرداخته است. علاوه بر تایید تاثیر منفی محیط های مجازی بر هویت سازمانی معلمان، نتایج به دست آمده حاکی از آن بود که عوامل مختلف شخصی، آموزشی و سازمانی به عنوان عامل ایجادگر و بازدارنده عمل می کنند. در این مطالعه به پیشنهاداتی برای مقابله با چالش های محیط مجازی اشاره شده است.

Keywords: teacher identity, organizational identity, online teaching, change, phenomenology

Introduction

Relying on Social Identity Theory (SIT), Ashforth and Mael (1989) expanded the concept of social identity into organizational studies. SIT postulates that social identity constitutes a person's self-concept in the interface between their group belonging and personal value systems. Reviewing the literature on work



identities, Miscenko and Day (2016) found that organizational identity (OI) has attracted exponential attention among various types of identity at the collective level. OI is defined as a capacity for people who work together to see themselves as “us members of Organization X” (Haslam et al., 2017, p. 330).

Building OI, individuals undergo a process called identification, which means making sense of one’s self by accepting a variety of organization attributes such as “values, goals, beliefs, stereotypic traits, knowledge, skills, and abilities... as one’s own” (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 330). Although some believe that there are methodological differences between the ways OI and organizational identification are investigated in organizational studies (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003), the two concepts share a similar concern, which is understanding how individuals perceive themselves as members of an organization (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003). This study, in line with Scott et al. (1998), considers organizational identification as the process of emerging identity and relies on the common concerns of both concepts to explore the issues related to the ways individuals in an organization categorize and identify themselves as an organization member.

Wiesenfeld et al. (1999) consider organizational identification as the “critical glue” in virtual environments (p. 777). Understanding how individuals identify with their organizations is key to explaining social identities in organizational contexts (Haslam et al., 2003). Moreover, as Jenkins (1996) put forth, individual identities are entangled with collectively shared identities. Not only studying organizational identification is important to understanding the collective identity of teachers from fresh aspects, but it is also critical to fully acknowledge and predict individuals’ beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. Similarly, OI influences feelings of trust and stress, willingness to cooperate, commitment, job satisfaction, conformity to conventions, and motivation to learn (Eksi et al., 2020; Pham, 2020; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999). Most importantly, research has shown that social identification has profound consequences for basic human needs, such as fulfilling self-enhancement, affiliation, and safety (Elsbach, 1999). Therefore, if individuals define themselves in relation to an organization that embodies conflicting values with those of their own, there seems to be no space to meet the mentioned needs.

The transition from face-to-face to virtual modes of teaching often creates challenges regarding organizational identification. Separated from colleagues, supervisors, and other members, teachers might experience feelings of isolation, dispersion, and stress (MacIntyre et al., 2020). In this sense, Wiesenfeld et al. (2001) argue that virtual work disturbs the balance between concrete and psychological aspects of organizational identification. It means that psychological dimensions such as members’ perceptions about their organization gain more weight as people lose physical contact. Therefore, virtual work may transform the structure of an organization and consequently, the way workers define themselves in relation to their organization. Meanwhile, advocating the paradox of far-but-close, many believe that perceived proximity rather than physical proximity has more profound effects on the performance of people (see Wilson et al., 2008 for a summary).

Considering the critical consequences that OI may have on employees (Eksi et al., 2020; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Pham, 2020; Rozati, 2017; Scott, 2020), it is of utmost importance to examine the relationship between online teachers and their organizations, especially now that in response to the 2020 pandemic and the emergence of emergency remote teaching, many language teaching organizations run their classes through online teaching. Although an array of research exists on the issues of online teaching (see Carrillo & Flores, 2020 for a review; Lee & Yin, 2021; Park & Mac Donald, 2022), the identity formation of online teachers (Nazari & Seyri, 2021) and work circumstances (Loo et al., 2017), the potential of OI in this process have not been adequately addressed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education. Given this background, the present study aimed at examining the OIs of Iranian EFL teachers and how online environments affect their identities.

Literature Review

Teachers' Organizational Identity

As Norton (2016) mentioned, research on identity has been done from a variety of perspectives in the field of language teaching and learning. However, with the expansion of digital innovations, there are varied less-explored avenues for future research (Norton, 2016). One significant area with an emphasis on social identity is OI. Ashforth and Mael (1989) introduced OI to the field of management studies. Since then, OI has been studied in different fields including management, psychology, and education.

It has been argued that both SIT and the socio-cognitive approach referring to the views of social identity and social constructionist theory (SCT) can be very helpful in studying OI (Ghafar Samar et al., 2011). This is because SIT and SCT, both emphasizing how individuals feel and act in congruence with their institution and other group members, reinforce the conditions that OI establishes in individuals' workplaces. Contrary to SIT, however, some theorizing suggests that identification is a dynamic, multidimensional, and inconsistent phenomenon (Haslam et al., 2017; Miscenko & Day, 2016). Similarly, there has been a call not to see identification relationships as passive and stable, and instead to consider identification growth as a function of context variation (Ashforth et al., 2008). Albert and Whetten (1985) asserted that OIs have 3 main attributes: being central, distinctive, and enduring. The first feature, centrality means recognition of being fundamental to an organization. Distinctiveness refers to a characteristic that differentiates an organization from others, while the third feature, enduringness, is defined as the extent to which identity and sustainability are demonstrated over time. OI is strengthened when the same attributes are shared between the individual and the organization.

Although OI has been rigorously studied by social sciences such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, communication, and anthropology, it has received less attention in education, particularly in language education. There is only sparse research on this subject in the field referring to OI as the institutional identity to inclusively talk about instructors' and teachers' identities with reference to their institutions. In one study, Ghafar Samar et al. (2011), gathering qualitative data from interviews, studied the relationship between teacher efficacy and the institutional identity of teachers. They found strong positive correlations between the two variables, meaning that low-efficacy teachers were rated low on OI, while high-efficacy teachers had strong institutional identities. Turning to SIT and SCT as helpful standpoints for studying teachers' OI, the researchers explained the results in terms of in-group ties teachers developed in their institutions.

In a similar vein, Rozati (2017) investigated the same relationship (i.e., teachers' efficacy and OI) and utilized a series of questionnaires to gather data from 100 EFL teachers. The results revealed that institutional identity was positively associated with teacher efficacy, pinpointing the importance of developing institutional identities of teachers in enhancing their efficacy. This line of research indicates that studying OI among language teachers demands further attention as teachers dialectically interact with multiple institutional particularities, which shapes their sense-making, personal investment, and organizational performances.

Online Teacher Identity

Teachers construct their identities differentially in response to the contexts they operate (Barkhuizen, 2017). As an evident example of such contexts, online teaching has largely impacted teachers' identity construction (Johnson et al., 2014; Nazari & Seyri, 2021). Considering the increasing advancement of online teaching, studying teachers' online identities rises to a growing prominence (Robson, 2018). However, only a few studies have focused on this issue (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2014; Nazari & Seyri, 2021; Robson, 2018).

For example, Johnson et al. (2014), examining teachers' identities in cyberspaces, conducted case studies on four university teachers who moved their on-campus classes to online instruction. They found that teachers' affective responses to technology were related to changes in their identities and the level of

discomfort they experienced. Likewise, teachers' teaching orientation (i.e., teacher-centered or student-centered) had an influence on how teachers felt about technology in teaching. In this regard, one teacher whose classes tended to be more teacher-led considered the role of technology as disruptive. Moreover, teachers reported that fear of failure, distance from students, and concerns over devaluing the status of teachers jeopardized their identities when shifting to online teaching.

In another study, Nazari and Seyri (2021) examined teachers' identity shifts as a result of a transition from personal to online classes. The analysis of data from interviews, group discussions, and self-reported practices, gathered from 6 Iranian teachers, revealed that six elements characterized such a transition, namely tension, subject-related instructional variation, conceptual variation, emotional labor, (in)congruities in identity extension, and increased reflectivity. The findings showed that the transition to online classes was an emotionally-charged experience for teachers in that while they had more opportunities to connect with learners, they could not express all their emotions towards the learners easily. In response to such a situation, however, teachers' experiences were varied as only some of them could develop emotional adaptability. Variations in teachers' identity transition were also reported between and among the hard and soft science teachers in perceiving the tension and enacting their ideas.

Additionally, examining American teachers' profiles and posts on Twitter, Carpenter et al. (2019) focused on how the personal and professional aspects of the teachers' identities are represented in their tweets. The findings showed that the participants mostly used Twitter with a focus on their professional identities rather than personal aspects. For an instance, they used hashtags for education-related issues.

As language institutions have increasingly used digital technologies and online recourses, there is a need to further examine how teachers construct their identities in online forums, especially OI which has received inadequate attention in online contexts. The present study aims to address this gap.

The Current Study

Almost in every definition of teacher identity from a social perspective (see Villegas et al., 2020 for a summary), the role of the institutional environment has been emphasized (Barkhuizen, 2017). However, few studies have examined language teachers' OI, especially in online contexts. As acknowledged by several scholars, teacher identity is formed and reformed over time and places due to social interactions with educators, learners, and institutions (Barkhuizen, 2017; Van Lankveld et al., 2017). Moreover, some issues related to identity, such as how OI is operated and changed, have been little addressed (Aracı, 2019).

Additionally, given the paucity of research on online teacher identity (Carrillo & Flores, 2020), exploring how language teachers construct their OI in virtual environments is gaining more significance. Considering the substantial role of context in teacher identity construction, the current study is innovative in examining a context that presents some conflicts and challenges to English teachers. Education in Iran has been dominated by political and cultural enforcement making teacher identification challenging for Iranian English teachers (Eslamdoost et al., 2020). In Iran, the Ministry of Higher Education outlines the content of national textbooks, syllabi, and curricula following Iranian-Islamic culture (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015). This overlooks multiple aspects of social and cultural values of English-speaking countries in national textbooks, owing to their incompatibility with Islamic ethics (Eslamdoost et al., 2020). Private institutions in Iran, unlike public organizations, have the freedom to practice wide-ranging international textbooks published for English language teaching (Mohammadian & Norton, 2016). Given this background, the present study focuses on the OI of online Iranian English teachers by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do the OI orientations of EFL teachers change as a result of online teaching?
2. What are the antecedents and barriers to EFL teachers' OIs in online teaching?
3. What are the perceived impacts of OI on EFL teachers' performances in online teaching?

Method

To address the online teachers' OIs, the present study adopted an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). As pinpointed by Gill (2014), OI is essentially phenomenological. Therefore, IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003) as a method of phenomenology that expounds on individuals' lived experiences serves as a helpful tool for collecting rich data from subjects and fine-tunes researchers' knowledge of OI (Gill, 2014).

Participants and Research Setting

Collecting data from questionnaires, the researchers selected 14 teachers divided into 2 groups, 7 with high OI and 7 with low OI, as the sample of the study. Participants were 6 males and 8 females, with an average age of 34 years (range: 26-42), and an average of 10 years of experience. Four women and three men constituted each group. All teachers taking part in this study had at least two years of teaching experience in the organizations they provided information about. Averagely, they had 4 years of teaching experience in their institutions. Nine of the teachers held MA in teaching EFL, while 3 of them held BA and 2 others were Ph.D. students of applied linguistics (Table 1). They all reported that they had been provided with some short video clips familiarizing them with the medium of online teaching. Both teachers and students had access to the Internet and they used various gadgets, such as computers, laptops, and tablets to participate in the online classes.

TABLE 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Teaching experience	Degree	Teaching experience in the institute	Group
Interviewee 1	29	male	7	MA	3	1
Interviewee 2	36	female	9	Ph. Dc	3	1
Interviewee 3	41	male	12	BA	6	1
Interviewee 4	38	female	10	MA	4	2
Interviewee 5	42	male	17	MA	12	1
Interviewee 6	30	female	9	MA	7	2
Interviewee 7	26	female	5	MA	2	1
Interviewee 8	28	male	6	MA	3	2
Interviewee 9	31	female	7	MA	4	2
Interviewee 10	33	female	8	MA	2	2
Interviewee 11	29	male	8	BA	5	2
Interviewee 12	29	female	9	MA	4	1
Interviewee 13	40	female	13	BA	5	1
Interviewee 14	39	male	15	Ph. Dc	2	2

IPA does not seek information saturation (Gill, 2014). Thus, large sample sizes may only render the process of extensive engagement with each case impossible (Smith et al., 2009). Typically, a sample size of three, even a single case would be appropriate in IPA (Smith, 2004). However, to thoroughly understand a phenomenon through interviews, including 3 to 15 individuals who share the same experience might be desirable (Creswell, 2013). Keeping that in mind, the researchers gathered the data from a sample of 14 Iranian EFL teachers.

Contextual, social, and cultural backgrounds of individuals play a significant role in their construction of experiences, and may consequently help sense-making (Smith, 2004). Given that, a brief description of the context is necessary. Although a university degree verifying teachers' instruction in teaching English is required by many institutes, teachers mainly need to pass a written teacher knowledge test, take part in teacher training courses held by the institute, and deliver an acceptable teaching demo to start working in the language institute. Due to the differences between private and public language institutes in Iran, to study

the effects of government educational policies on teachers' OI, the sample of this study included only teachers from the public sector, a governmental language institute in Iran. In this language institute, teachers need to follow government-mandated educational policies reflected in the curricula, materials, and syllabi. To ensure if the principles and policies are adhered to, supervisors regularly assign observers to attend the classes. Observers complete pre-defined observation schemes based on which promotion or demotion to higher or lower levels happens. The criteria for participation included a) having at least 2 years of teaching experience in the institute and b) having the required OI for the questionnaire.

Instruments

Questionnaire

The researchers elicited data from two instruments, a questionnaire and interviews. The first one, the questionnaire, was used to divide the participants. The Organizational Identification Questionnaire constituted the first part of the questionnaire. The questionnaire, comprising six items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from '1' strongly disagree to '5' strongly agree, was adopted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). The reliability and validity of the instrument were reported to be desirable with Cronbach's alpha of .83 (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The questionnaire has been widely used in educational and organizational spheres and it was developed drawing on social identity theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In this questionnaire, the higher the teachers' scores, the stronger their OIs would be assumed. Participants' scores were calculated based on the total average of ratings ranging from 1 to 5. First, four quartiles were defined as 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, and 4-5. An average score of 1-2 was regarded as low OI, whereas the quartile of 4-5 was considered to represent the high OI group.

Although the wording of items was modified to fit the context of the study (i.e., language teachers), a set of open-ended items accompanied the aforementioned questionnaire to gain a deeper understanding of the teacher-organization relationships (OI) and make sure that participants' group assignment was done reasonably. Therefore, the researchers designed an open-ended questionnaire to explore the teachers' OI based on the model frameworks of Ashforth and Mael (1989) and Mael and Ashforth (1992) as these accounts have been examined in other studies and provide a comprehensive perspective of OI. The questionnaire, comprising six items, focused on the same themes of Ashforth and Mael's (1989) framework, including organizational prestige, distinctiveness, satisfaction, and relationship with others. The items were checked content wisely by 3 experts, holding a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics. It took approximately 15 minutes for respondents to complete the questionnaire. Fifty-eight teachers completed the questionnaire (response rate:80%). The data were scrutinized to find teachers with opposing levels of OI so that the insights from different participants enrich the data. The data were analyzed by the second author, calculating the average score of each participant and analyzing the participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire using thematic analyses. However, the only themes in this part were high or low OI, meaning that the researcher looked for any clue to attribute teachers' stances regarding their language institutes to high and low OI. The data from this part also helped in understanding the participants' answers to the close-ended questions deeper. Moreover, this feature, as explained in the finding section, assisted in capturing the most informative responses to some questions. Fourteen respondents, 7 with high OIs and 7 with low OIs whose results of close- and open-ended questionnaires were consistent, were selected and consented to take part in phone interviews.

Phone interviews

Phenomenological methodologies, especially IPA, rely heavily on semi-structured interviews (Gill, 2014) since they smooth the path for exploratory inquiries (Smith, 2004). Due to the 2020 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not possible. Therefore, the researchers utilized semi-structured phone interviews to capture OI changes among teachers and explore how government policies affected their identification. The

questions were formulated by the researchers. The interviews started with items retrieving participants' background information, such as age, gender, and academic degrees. To ensure the content validity of the questionnaire and interview items, 3 content experts and two university professors inspected the items through experts' checklist sheets for establishing validity.

Procedure

To find the potential participants, after securing the institute's consent, the online version of the questionnaire along with a brief description of the study was sent through WhatsApp (a social networking application) to teachers working at the language institute. Those who met the criteria and agreed to interviews were invited for having phone interviews.

At the beginning of interviewing, participants were reassured that their responses would be treated as private, and used for research purposes. They also permitted the researchers to digitally record the interviews. Following phenomenological interview recommendations (Smith et al., 2009), the interviewers engaged in a conversation with the teachers whereby succeeding questions, covering a range of questions centered on OI, were added and modified based on previous answers. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes for each individual. Memos were created immediately after each interview.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed in several steps. First, the transcripts were loaded into NVivo software after the data were collected through interviews. Following this, each participant was coded as a case. Lastly, creating nodes and sub-nodes for themes, data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis. For example, when one of the teachers associated his feeling of being left out with handling students on his own, the emerging theme was primarily entitled *student problems*. Further analysis of data led to the identification of how teachers attributed their experiences to their organizations, accompanied by the emergence of more instances of the same theme, resulting in the modification of such a subordinate theme to *support* and the development of *institutional factors* as a major theme. The coding procedure was open to any instances of OI changes and effects of educational policies. This analysis was conducted based on the four-stage inductive analysis of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003), meaning that the researchers, first, specified the emerging themes addressing the essence of the experience. Second, they found cases of master themes in the data by connecting and clustering the emerging themes for each interviewee. After that, other transcripts were analyzed in a similar vein, and themes were modified correspondingly. Lastly, through the researchers' interpretation, the final table of themes was developed. To have a validity check (Groenewald, 2004), the second researcher rechecked the extracted verbatims to ensure that the varied aspects of the transcripts had been precisely recorded.

Finding

How OI Changed

Unchanged OI

The qualitative data analysis of the first research question revealed two themes in OI after the adoption of online teaching. First, for both high and low OI teachers, OI did not grow stronger after the transition to online teaching, rather it grew weaker for low OI teachers, and for high OI teachers, it remained the same. Interviewee 7 in group 1 (high OI) viewed her identification with the institute consistent as online teaching had brought no changes to her OI.

#Our medium of teaching has changed. It doesn't mean we are different teachers or we are working for different institutes. I still think of myself as the same teacher teaching the same way in the same institute. (Interviewee 7)

Negative OI change

In contrast, other teachers in both groups reported a poor sense of belonging to their organizations. Interviewee 8 in group 2 (low OI) narrated his feeling of detachment from institutes because of the nature of virtual classes.

#Now that you teach online, you even forget which institute you are working in. Honestly, the only thing that reminds me of it is the institute's website when I want to enter my classes. ... You don't get to know or even see students, let alone the institute's supervisors and other colleagues. (Interviewee 8)

In these extracts, how the transition to online teaching affected teachers' OIs could be perceived. The high OI teacher (Interviewee 7) emphasized that “*the medium of teaching*” is independent of her identity and her instructional approach by referring to “*the same teacher... in the same institute*” and “*same way*”, respectively. However, lack of face-to-face contact created shallow recognition of the institutes as Interviewee 8 argued except for “the institute website” he had no other means of association with the institutes and the students.

Antecedents and Barriers of OI

The second research question explored the responsible factors (i.e., antecedents and barriers) of OI. Participants with high OI, group 1, could best provide this study with insights about the antecedents of OI while the other group could capture the barriers to OI by considering their lack of OI. Therefore, the first and the second groups were asked about the underlying factors contributing to and hampering the growth of OI, respectively. Three major themes were identified, namely instructional, institutional, and personal factors. Instructional factors did not appear among the antecedent themes, as teachers did not consider them a major factor contributing to the development of OI in their accounts. Therefore, institutional and personal factors constituted the antecedents of OI, while all three accounted for the barriers to OI.

Institutional factors as antecedents

Several factors influence teachers along the process of organizational identification. These factors were called OI antecedents in this study. The themes of institutional and personal factors addressed the antecedents of OI, each including several subthemes. Regarding the institutional theme, participants described how reputation and job security shaped their well-established OIs. For instance, interviewee 3 mentioned that:

#Each year, you can see that the news of one or two students from the 10 top students in Konkur [Iranian university entrance exam] participating in X classes goes viral on the Internet. I am proud to be a member of this family. (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 3 labeled the institute his “*family*” and felt “*proud*” of the students’ accomplishments, the same way that family members would feel in such situations. Another common subordinate institutional theme was more or less related to the opportunities that the institute offered to the teachers. For instance, participants had no unnecessary worries about losing their jobs since the job contracts were clear and

reliable. To interviewee 7, job security showed “*how much the institutes care about their teachers*”. Teachers conceived job security as an act of institutes’ investment in them. Therefore, there is seemingly a reciprocal relationship between feeling important to the institute and valuing the institute.

Personal factors as antecedents

The participants also mentioned past experiences with the institute as another antecedent subtheme that brought about loyalty and commitment. One of the interviewees reported that:

#I was a student in X for quite a long time... I actually chose this institute because of several things. First, I was familiar with the environment, teaching methods, books, and stuff. Second, it worked for me and I became, let's say, an advanced user of English. Last, I wanted to get back to the same classrooms despite this time as a teacher and even more honored. (Interviewee 5)

Long-term familiarity “*with the environment, teaching methods*” and materials of institute X shaped the identity of Interviewee 5. Hence, he chose to be in the institute as he believed in the effectiveness of its educational system. He mentioned that working as a teacher there made him “*even more honored*”. In this regard, the institute was considered a place where the teacher could approach his ideal professional self and fulfill his earlier aspirations.

Instructional factors as barriers

Concerning the barriers, all three themes of instructional, institutional, and personal were involved. Some participants disapproved of the instructional means of the institute, including their materials and suggested teaching methods. Interviewee 14, criticizing the materials and methods specified by the institutes as ineffective and outdated, mentioned that “*traditional teaching methods like audiolingual method, old boring books, and movies with low quality require serious modifications*”. This dissatisfaction was also correlated with the over-censorship of the books. Interviewee 14 continued that “*pictures of girls and women are censored that may sometimes cause severe problems understanding the conversations*”. Inadequacies of the determined materials and methods made teaching challenging for the teachers, and consequently, stopped them from developing connections with their institutes. Moreover, three teachers claimed that technology made the situation worse. The following excerpt can best illustrate this issue.

#I believe the online side of the classes has made instruction and learning more difficult. We need to keep up with the same syllabus, lesson plans, and textbooks despite all the changes and problems. They [supervisors] need to be realistic. The syllabuses heavily burden the students. (Interviewee 10)

As observed in this extract, the incompatibility of syllabi and lesson plans in the online environment posed added problems to deliver the lessons effectively. Interviewee 10 mentioned that the coverage of the same syllabi in online classes was not “*realistic*”. Teachers hold supervisors and the institute responsible for their overburdened workload. Hence, they could not identify with their institutes.

Institutional factors as barriers

From the participants’ perspective, the institutes were equally responsible for their low OIs. Lack of support, unprepared change to online mode, and strict rules and principles underlined the institutional barriers of OI. Five out of 7 teachers in group 2 attributed their low OIs to the lack of support from their organizations. Interviewee 8 mentioned that in online classrooms students required special support to handle technical problems, such as “*entering the room, connecting to the site, and using their webcam*” and he felt “*left out*”. Teachers were in need of institutional support to deal with the increased responsibility of

online teaching. As they had to be on their own, they did not develop a feeling of togetherness with their institutes.

Furthermore, some of the participants reflected on their experiences with online teaching as an abrupt change for which the institutes did not prepare them. One of the participants, for instance, complained that the institutes did not provide enough instruction and suggestions for online teaching.

#The institute prepared some short video clips to introduce the medium.... I believe they could do a better job holding webinars to help us take full advantage of its tools. You know it was more of a take-or-leave situation. If you can be an online teacher, take it. If you are dubious, we cannot help you. (Interviewee 11)

Interviewee 11 required more guidance to operate the technical aspects of the online classes. Competency in using technology was perceived as an immediate need for online classrooms. This gap drew the teachers and institutes further apart. Another recurrent subtheme in this category was strict rules that needed to be followed blindly by the teachers. Interviewee 8 explains this point:

#X has unreasonable principles...teachers are required to spend a specific amount of time on different sections of a lesson. It is important that they take the steps in order based on the teachers' guide. Any detour from the teachers' book is promptly reprimanded (Interviewee 8)

Teachers provided examples of several rules that they called “unreasonable”, as the aforementioned example by Interviewee 8. This inability to implement practice effectively reduced their level of identification with the institutes.

Personal factors as barriers

The hindrances had also a personal side. The divergence between the value systems of the individual and the organization as well as their anxiety to correspond to the requirements were two main subcategories. For one of the participants, the institute was threatening his professional identity as many facets of the required teaching method in the institute were incongruent with the person's own conceptions of TEFL. Interviewee 14 argued that “*this is not how I learned to teach*”. Following the preset methods was seen to obscure his self-image as a professional teacher. In Interviewee 14's view, online teaching required creativity and innovation in adapting teaching methods that were impeded by the institute. As the participant continued “*what about flexibility*”, he elaborated that online teaching provided a new environment with facilities unavailable before. However, the institute expected them to follow the same methodology. For example, the teacher used to practice grammar through repetition and substitution drills asking the whole class to repeat after him in face-to-face classes, which was hard to practice with online students. In return, he believed in “*post-method pedagogy*” which requires flexibility and contextualization. Furthermore, the transition to online classes largely led to increased stress and anxiety since they had to adapt themselves to the new environment and tackle the inadequacies, such as “*lack of instruction*” (Interviewee 11) and “*support*” (Interviewee 8) by themselves. In this regard, teachers considered institutions ineffectual in helping them play their professional roles in online teaching.

The Impact of OI on Performance

Positive impact

For the third research question, the participants' accounts were examined to explore perceptions of the effects of OI on their performances as EFL teachers. The results for high OI teachers revealed positive impacts, including increased confidence and efficacy, tolerance, and connectivity. They reported that

identifying with their particular institutes enhanced their levels of confidence and efficacy when they taught online. Interviewee 13 mentioned that *“as I know students consider me as a teacher of X, I don’t question myself as I normally do... This is what helps me manage the virtual classroom more effectively”*. For Interviewee 13, X organization’s reputation had caused a feeling of self-confidence that positively led to better classroom management. One of the participants also pointed out the effects of OI on her tolerance of occasional issues with the technology. The following extract indicates its impacts:

To keep X a brand, teachers can help satisfy parents’ expectations of an excellent teacher who is energetic, active, and devoted. By devoted I mean he devotes his free time to engaging the students and compensating for shortages. (Interviewee 2)

In the case of Interviewee 2, high OI enabled the teacher to develop tolerance. Despite the problems teachers had in online classes, they were willing to cater to students’ unaddressed needs. Identification with institutes helped them develop an understanding perspective. Another subtheme observed in this extract was connectivity. Connecting with students was another outcome of strong identification with the institutes. Motivation to engage in more connectivity with students was also reflected by other participants. For instance, Interviewee 1, who developed a high degree of OI because of his job security, related his OI to a feeling of relief that helped him focus on his teaching and building rapport with students: *“as I know I will be teaching here for coming years, I know some learners will be my students for next terms, so I try to know them”*. Even though the classes were online, the teacher developed more connectivity with students because he looked at it as a long-term relationship.

Negative impact

On the other hand, the analysis of the data from low OI teachers revealed two patterns of consequences. First, low OI was perceived to have a negative effect on most of the teachers. The participants referred to their negative feelings, namely dissatisfaction and dissociation caused by the lack of identification with the institutes. They reported that working in their institutes as online teachers was an *“overwhelming experience”* (Interviewees 11 & 8). Sentences such as *“I feel bad about my classes”*, *“I am exhausted”*, and *“I have enough on my plate, students learning problems and the Internet problems”* all provided evidence for their dissatisfaction. As a consequence, dissatisfaction with their online classes led to a degree of dissociation from the community of teachers. One of the participants mentioned that she was *“ashamed”* to call herself a teacher *“in a class where nothing is in its right place”* (Interviewee 10). She viewed a representative teacher as one who has the ability to act flexibly and creatively in the space given by her institute. However, having loose connections with her institute, she viewed such an opportunity unlikely.

Discussion

This study addressed the OI of online EFL teachers through 3 research questions. The findings of the first research question (i.e., how online teaching affected OI) revealed that the abrupt employment of online teaching reshaped teachers’ OIs in majorly a negative manner. This finding parallels those of previous research in that online teaching has the capacity to change teachers’ identities and their sense of belonging to their communities (Johnson et al., 2014; Nazari & Seyri, 2021; Robson, 2018). Moreover, it is in line with dynamic models of OI that view context as an influential element in the process of identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Haslam et al., 2017; Miscenko & Day, 2016). The analysis of data indicated that online teaching required its own adaptations and modifications that were not possible having teachers tied down by the institutes. To actualize their identities, teachers lacked institutional support and freedom to enact their agencies. As rightly pointed out by Wiesenfeld et al. (2001), perceived social support, the degree

to which individuals perceive that they are socially integrated and supported by members of an organization, gains more significance in moving from a face-to-face setting to a virtual environment.

Moreover, the second question of the study explored the antecedents and barriers of OI. Several factors, both facilitative and inhibitive, were found to account for the teachers' OIs. Institutions, obviously, played the most significant role. Central to the role of institutions in reinforcing OI appeared to be the reputation of the language institute. As suggested by Ashforth and Mael (1989), the perceived prestige of an organization by its employees is the chief motivator of OI. This refers to the second attribute of Albert and Whetten's (1985) OI, distinctiveness, reflecting that the need for feeling distinct contributes to collective identification. SIT also implicitly supports this issue by signifying that such identification enhances one's self-esteem and consequently affiliation with the group. Institutions also had a hindering impact on OI, as the meagerness of mentoring and support from the organizations led to teachers' dissatisfaction with their organizations.

Furthermore, the instructional policies imposed by language institutions acted as another element against OI. This element introduced another aspect of identity entangled with teachers' OIs. Identity shift which happens as a result of the change in the modes of membership in a community showed itself at the juncture of contextual organizational shift and the mode of belonging. At this juncture, the assigned identities by institutes as well as teachers' own instructional identities were found to conflict. Pennington (2016) defines instructional identity, a sub-identity of teachers' professional identity, as classroom persona characterized by the acts of teaching and teacher-learner interactions. The findings revealed that the mismatch between the expected teachers' roles and their conceptions of instruction acted as an impediment to OI construction. In their identity shifts, teachers viewed themselves neither as a member of online communities nor as a representative of their institutes. This happened because the set teaching methods, materials, and syllabuses of the institutes were in contrast with teachers' assumptions of how and what to teach. In line with the findings of Eslamdoost et al. (2020), this lack of congruency between teachers' ideologies and policymakers' regulations at national and institutional levels leads to identity conflicts. Also, they were unable to truly categorize themselves as online teachers due to the problems experienced in online teaching.

The challenges associated with the teachers' identification underscore the significant lack of teacher agency in the particular institutional context of this study. Partly by the Iranian Ministry of Education and more by the institutions, teachers were bound to be positioned only as implementers of the imposed policies. In such a context, teachers are passive recipients of decisions, unable to have an active role in managing changes in their teaching methods, instructional materials, and professional development. This contradicts the spirit of agency which demands an effective response to situational changes to reach professional goals. Mandatory requirements in the absence of justifications and directions either in the conceptual or practical aspects of instruction (i.e., online implementation) constrained the development of teacher agency and OI. This finding is in line with the results of Nazari and Seyri (2021) who indicated that online teaching has a negative impact on teachers' agency and consequently on their identity constructions due to multiple problems teachers face in virtual spaces.

Institutions and their instructional policies, however, were not the only determining factor. The personal selves of the teachers had also an effect as antecedents and barriers. As an antecedent, past experiences with the particular language institutes shaped the OI, ideal self, and teaching preferences of one of the participants. This finding refers to an element of teacher identity in Yazan's (2018) conceptual framework, teachers' biographies. According to Yazan (2018), teachers' past experiences, institutional biographies, and long-held views toward teaching and learning construct teachers' identities.

As barriers to OI, teachers' emotions and personal values created some tension. Teacher identity is interwoven with emotional labor (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). Emotional suffering as the third concept of emotional labor (Zembylas, 2005) explicates the subtheme of values in the findings by referring to the conflicting ideologies, perceptions, and values between institutional and personal entities that caused feelings of anxiety and incapability. Similarly, the first concept of emotional labor, emotional freedom (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021), elucidates why participants counted differing values and strict rules as hindrances to OI. Emotional freedom implies that teachers enjoy emotional freedom when they

have the opportunity to act and choose freely without any external (more relevantly here institutional) constraints and compulsion (Zembylas, 2005). Teachers need to maintain self-verification, consistency, and congruity of self-concepts concerning their core values over time. Likewise, Albert and Whetten (1985) discussed that durability is an attribute of OI that emerges as the values of individuals and organizations are shared to a great extent.

Lastly, regarding the third research question investigating the consequences of OI, results showed that different patterns underlaid the perceived impact of OI on teaching. In line with previous research (Ghafar Samar et al., 2011; Rozati, 2017), high OI resulted in higher teacher efficacy. Similarly, low OI led to negative emotions such as feelings of dissatisfaction and dissociation, signifying the role of emotion in identity development as discussed before. This, generally, supports the past research (Elsbach, 1999; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999) that strong OI has positive effects on individuals' performances.

Conclusion

This study associated several factors with the antecedents, barriers, and perceived consequences of OI. Also, the dynamics of virtual transition and how it mediates teachers' potential to act according to their ideals of the profession were investigated. The findings of this study showed that the notions of identity and identity transition are complicated and multisided. This complication is rooted in the multi-membership of individuals in different communities of practice and contextualized social processes (Miller, 2009).

The current study can offer practical implications to teacher educators and policymakers. First, the teachers of this study argued that numerous problems caused dissatisfaction and subsequently low OI, including institutional and instructional factors. Therefore, it is imperative that some courses be designed to assist teachers to cope with the challenges of virtual environments and the speed of transition. Moreover, the teachers were in demand of support from their institutions to free themselves from technical issues and concentrate on their teaching. In this regard, institutions need to assign support teams and set the grounds for teachers to engage with team members to deal with students' problems.

Similarly, there seemed to be some conflicts between the policies authorized at institutes regarding instructional affordances, teachers' personal beliefs, and value systems. As mentioned by Flores and Swennen (2020), the consequences of emergency remote teaching might be more critical for some delicate contexts. That said, considering the mentioned incompatibilities, the educational system and teacher education programs should reconsider old policies to tackle the contemporary problematic practices by having a broad view of the past, present, and future (Ling, 2017). Further research might respond to the specifications of such programs if some initiatives are aimed to be taken. As another suggestion, future studies might include a larger sample to better represent the understanding of a wider population of OI, identity shifts, and virtual spaces.

Lastly, this study introduced an aspect of teachers' identity to the field of language teaching that has been little studied. Given the noted influence of institutions on teachers, especially in the context of technological change, it would be worthwhile to investigate how institutions can use productive exercises of power to enhance teaching and learning. As shown in this study, a feeling of contribution to the shared meaning of concepts and practices in the organization might work better than a sense of imposed dos and don'ts. It is hoped that this area is flourished with the insights of interested researchers and further studies.

It should be noted that due to several limitations of this study, the generalizability of the findings should be taken with caution. The small sample of the study selected from one language institute, for example, may not fully represent the context of all EFL teachers in Iran. Moreover, interviews were the main source of data collection in this study. Perhaps, methodological triangulation could illuminate a more comprehensive and finer picture of teachers' OI. Lastly, gender seems to be a potential determining factor in studies in the realm of OI. Although this study did not examine the possible differences between males' and females' OI, we acknowledge that gender deserves to be investigated more rigorously in future research.

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