

# “Most of us are not feeling well”: exploring Iranian EAP practitioners’ emotions and identities

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## Abstract

Although theory and research on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners have grown recently, there is little documented research on their emotions and identities. This study explored the emotions of 12 Iranian EAP practitioners and the associated role in their identity construction. Adopting a narrative inquiry methodology, the study examined the practitioners’ emotions across the Zembylas’s (2002) three-dimensional framework of teacher emotions and their role in the practitioners’ identity construction. Data analyses revealed that while the practitioners consider recognition from students as contributive to their positive emotions and identities, sociocultural-ideological discourses and power relations negatively influence their emotions and identities. Such idiosyncrasies were viewed to create huge dissonances between the practitioners’ identity and their professional sense-making at personal, interpersonal, and macro-structural levels. The study offers implications regarding EAP practitioners’ emotions and identities situated within sociocultural localities of EAP instruction.

**Keywords:** English for Academic Purposes, EAP practitioners, teacher emotions, teacher identity construction, narrative inquiry.

## Resumen

*“Muchos de nosotros no nos sentimos bien”: explorando las emociones e identidades de los profesionales iraníes del inglés con fines académicos*

Aunque tanto la teoría como la investigación en torno a los profesionales del inglés con fines académicos (*English for Academic Purposes*: EAP) han

experimentado recientemente un importante crecimiento, hay poca investigación documentada sobre sus emociones e identidades. El presente estudio explora las emociones de 12 profesionales iraníes de EAP y su papel en la construcción de su identidad. Con base en la metodología de investigación narrativa, el estudio analiza las emociones de los profesionales a través del marco tridimensional de Zembylas (2002) de las emociones de los profesores y su papel en la construcción de la identidad de los profesionales. El análisis de los datos evidencia que, si bien los profesionales consideran que el reconocimiento de los estudiantes contribuye a sus emociones e identidades positivas, los discursos socioculturales-ideológicos y las relaciones de poder influyen de forma negativa en sus emociones e identidades. Estas idiosincrasias se interpretan como elementos que crean grandes disonancias entre la identidad de los profesionales y su percepción profesional a nivel personal, interpersonal y macroestructural. El estudio tiene en cuenta las implicaciones con respecto a las emociones e identidades de los profesionales de EAP situadas dentro de los contextos socioculturales de enseñanza de EAP.

**Palabras clave:** Inglés con Fines Académicos, profesionales de EAP, emociones de los profesores, construcción de la identidad docente, investigación narrativa.

## 1. Introduction

The professionalism of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners has gained increasing attention over the past decade (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Campion, 2016; Ding, 2019; Ding & Campion, 2016). In response to this growing recognition, research has addressed various aspects of EAP practitioners' professionalism, including cognitions, practices, identities, and professional development (for relevant reviews, see Basturkmen, 2014; Nazari, 2020). A significant part of EAP practitioners' work is their professional responsibilities, engagement with contextual localities, and responding to socio-educational needs, all of which contribute to their developing identities (Tao & Gao, 2018). In light of such contextual idiosyncrasies, EAP practitioners construct identities that guide their cognitions, practices, and sense of professionalism, and situate their work within a larger sphere of sociocultural particularities of EAP instruction (Ding, 2019; Ding & Campion, 2016; Nguyen, 2019).

In his work on EAP practitioner identity, Ding (2019) elaborates on three forces shaping practitioner identity development, encompassing social (sociocultural), structural (institutional), and disciplinary (internal tensions of

EAP) dimensions. Ding further argues for examining the “conditions and materiality that govern what [EAP practitioners] can realistically achieve or would like to achieve” (p. 70). The above three aspects and the centrality of contextual discourses of EAP instruction have also been emphasized by Tao and Gao (2018) in shaping practitioners’ developing identities, and especially by Atai et al. (2018) in the context of Iran. Given the significant role of such contextual understandings in shaping identities, there is a need for further research on EAP practitioners’ identity construction. Moreover, considering the fundamental role of emotions in teachers’ identities (e.g., Benesch, 2020; Fairley, 2020) and the multifaceted nature of EAP practitioners’ work (Basturkmen, 2014), the emotional side of their professionalism merits further attention.

The present study aims to fill this gap and explores Iranian EAP practitioners’ emotions (i.e., how internal feelings are constructed in light of personal and contextual characteristics) and their role in practitioner identity construction (i.e., how EAP teachers view the role of emotional particularities in their self-perceptions) in light of Zembylas’s (2002) three-dimensional framework of teacher emotions. In pursuing this goal, we will discuss how the study unpacks the particularities of EAP teaching in Iran in terms of the role of personal, institutional, and sociocultural issues in EAP teachers’ professional practice. By focusing on these three dimensions of emotions, we will show how EAP teaching is shaped by sociocultural and disciplinary considerations, which provides an overall understanding of the emotional process EAP teachers go through in terms of their identity and agency. Such an exploration also offers implications for EAP teachers in other contexts in showing how context figures as a significant factor in their emotions and identity construction, especially in a context like Iran. These findings hold the potential to offer original contributions for the international EAP scholarship and help EAP teachers and teacher educators to come to a better understanding of EAP teachers’ emotions and identities, and the range of factors shaping their professionalism.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. English language teacher identity and emotions

Over the past two decades, research on language teacher identity (LTI) construction has grown exponentially (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022a, 2022b;

Mehdizadeh et al., 2023, Nazari et al., 2023a, 2023b). The reason for such augmented attention is that language teachers are no longer viewed as mere content deliverers, but as individuals who develop personalized sense-makings in the process of becoming teachers in response to contextual definitions of language teaching (e.g., Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). For example, Eslamdoost et al. (2020) report on the religious beliefs Iranian teachers hold, especially their appearance, which define their positioning in relation to institutional identities and participants. Similar findings have been reported by Ding and De Costa (2018) in the context of China in how faith comes to (re)shape an experienced teacher's defined and adopted identities.

Attention to identity construction has also been reflected in scholarship on EAP practitioners. In a study on Chinese EAP practitioners, Tao and Gao (2018) examined eight Chinese practitioners' identities through life-history interviews. The researchers developed a model of EAP teacher identities, which involved three components of socio-economic dimensions, institutional contributors, and professional development work experience, which appeared to be associated with special bearings for the positive and negative emotions that EAP teachers could experience. In another study, Atai, Babaii and Lotfi Gaskaree (2018) examined nine Iranian EAP practitioners' professional identities through life-history interviews and philosophy statements. Data analyses revealed eight identities for teachers defined by their role as "creators and users of learning opportunities; teachers as selectors and users of teaching/learning materials; teachers as assessors and evaluators; teachers as researchers; teachers as realizers of and facilitators of the development of learners' (full) potentials; teachers as observers of ethicality; teachers as learners; and, teachers as teacher educators" (p. 104). Given the significant role of emotions in teachers' identities (e.g., Benesch, 2020; Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022b; Fairley, 2020; Wang et al., 2021) and the multifaceted nature of EAP practitioners' work (Atai et al., 2018; Basturkmen, 2014), the emotional side of their professionalism has received scant attention.

A key constituent of teacher identities is emotions, to the extent that "teacher identity is at bottom affective and is dependent upon power and agency" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 214). In light of the social turn in applied linguistics, research on the connection between language teachers' emotions and identities has gained a surge of attention (De Costa et al., 2018; Fairley,

2020; Mehdizadeh et al., 2023; Nazari et al., 2023a; Nazari & Karimpour, 2022). For example, Li (2020) examined the interplay between beliefs, emotions, and identities of two Chinese teachers by relying on Barcelos' (2015) call for the integrated examination of identity construction as guided by emotions and beliefs. The analysis of the teachers' narratives indicated the connection between beliefs and emotions, and their impacts on the teachers' identity construction. Moreover, the study highlights the significant role of localities of teaching in the teachers' developing identities.

## 2.2. Theoretical framework

The definition of emotions and identity construction in the present study captures a range of personal, institutional, and sociocultural dimensions in the connection between emotion and identity (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2003). The study is theoretically informed by Zembylas's (2002) three-dimensional framework of teacher emotions that captures the internal-external spheres and manifestations of emotions, which are considered as sticky objects attached to the identity web teachers (re)construct in light of their historicity and professional membership (Benesch, 2017). The framework has three components: intrapersonal (personal), interpersonal (institutional), and intergroup (sociocultural) levels. These three levels capture teachers' personal emotional sense-making, how institutional membership contributes to their emotions, and how macro-level societal discourses and power relations contribute to teachers' emotions and identities (Benesch, 2017, 2020).

Considering that EAP practitioners' identity construction is in constant synergy with social, structural, and disciplinary complexities of EAP instruction (Ding, 2019), Zembylas' (2002) framework can effectively portray how Iranian EAP practitioners' emotions and identities are shaped in light of particularities of teaching. Specifically, the framework could be effective in examining EAP practitioners' emotions and identities for three reasons. The first reason seems to lie in EAP practitioners' professional identities in relation to their roles. In this vein, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) proposed five roles for ESP teachers, including teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator, which are likely to add to the complexities EAP teachers could face in constructing their identities and the emotions they experience. Moreover, Atai et al. (2018) discuss the narrative of an EAP practitioner, Diba, whose comments mirror the significance of attending to students' emotions in

shaping practitioners' professional identities including commitment and sense of responsibility and contentment. EAP practitioners' professional roles can, thus, be accompanied by emotional labor relative to each of these five roles.

Second, given that EAP practitioners' educational background does not necessarily involve developing content expertise (e.g., Ding & Campion, 2016), those who move to the EAP context are quite likely to experience various emotions that in turn shape their identities. For example, Chang (2017) reports on the identity transition of an EAP practitioner, Rachel, whose transition to ESP instruction was accompanied by multiple emotional conflicts such as being overwhelmed, feeling ill-prepared, and feeling anxious, which collectively made her struggle in developing adaptability to her new professional identity. Moreover, changing the context of teaching was one of the major reasons for which the general English teachers in Song's (2016) study experienced vulnerability. Third, as there are no systematic EAP teacher education programs in Iran (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018), Iranian EAP practitioners may experience high emotional labor, which can negatively influence their developing identities. Research has indicated that Iranian EAP practitioners experience emotional challenges that negatively affect their professionalism, such as isolation, lack of contentment, and lack of professional support (e.g., Atai et al., 2018; Estaji & Rahimi, 2014; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). In addition, Zembylas' framework fits well with Ding's (2019) tripartite conceptualization of the factors shaping EAP teachers' identities in terms of sociocultural, institutional, and personal dimensions shaping EAP teachers' identity, and here specifically with a focus on their emotions.

### **2.3. Purpose of the study**

Despite the recent growth of attention to EAP practitioners, there is little systematic research on their emotions and identity construction. Additionally, the lack of adequate empirical, practical, and institutional attention to EAP practitioners in Iran "has resulted in a fuzzy state in which teachers basically follow their own tentative conceptualizations of the nature of EAP instruction" (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017, p. 44). Moreover, in the same context, Estaji and Rahimi (2014) examined resilience among EAP practitioners. Their results showed that resilience featured as a substantial factor in the practitioners' self-perceptions and was linked to sociocultural-educational idiosyncrasies that define EAP teaching in Iran. Furthermore,

Kaivanpanah et al. (2021) found that Iranian EAP practitioners face multiple challenges, especially “low motivation for and fear of EAP” of students, which complicate the practitioners’ effective instruction (p. 7). Such challenges were also highlighted in Tavakoli and Tavakol’s (2018) study in that the Iranian practitioners argued that “teacher bashing and humiliation are the worst parts of EAP courses” (p. 34). As this body of knowledge indicates, the Iranian context poses multiple emotional conflicts that influence EAP practitioners’ identities. However, there is little systematic research on how practitioners perceive their emotions and identities in this context, and how emotions interact with contextual idiosyncrasies to shape the practitioners’ identities. More specifically, although the literature reports on the emotions EAP teachers experience, emotions and identity – two key factors shaping (EAP) teachers’ professional practice – have not been studied in the scholarship on EAP teachers’ professionalism. The present study aims to begin to fill this gap in the knowledge base of EAP teacher education by addressing the following question:

How do Iranian EAP practitioners’ intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup emotions shape their professional identities?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Background

The present study was conducted in Iran where EAP instruction is provided with the aim of preparing and assisting university students to communicate effectively in order to fulfill their academic and professional needs (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017). By focusing on specialized texts, EAP courses aim to assist university students to become prepared for the range of issues they encounter in their future workplace (Iranmehr et al. 2018).

As a major part of the curricula, university students in Iran are demanded to pass three obligatory courses planned by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT). Policy, planning, and evaluation have also changed over the years in light of governmental shifts. One such change relates to oscillations in university matriculation in that over the past decade, a greater number of students have entered higher education through private universities. Such universities are more lenient in student entrance and their prime criterion for student acceptance is the economic adequacy of candidates.

Another change relates to the way instructors are evaluated. Formerly, the instructors were primarily evaluated based on the type and number of classes. However, a shift of focus has occurred in which, as Iranmehr et al. (2018) and Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018) put it, quality is gauged against the benchmark of contributions to the educational system, particularly publications. This issue has also created a competitive culture in that, according to Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018), little use is made of scholarly publications and a disorganized collection of publications is garnered. This issue has created an increasingly competitive space with little funding available, with instructors aiming for immediately completing the projects, and obtaining the funds as soon as possible. However, it must be acknowledged that such a culture exists due to the economic problems of the instructors and their low salaries (Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016), which could negatively influence practitioners' developing identities, as also reported in Tao and Gao (2018).

### **3.2. Participants**

Data for this study were collected from 12 EAP practitioners who taught EAP courses at different universities in Iran. Their age ranged from 34 to 38 years and their experience in teaching EAP courses ranged from 8 to 12 years. All the instructors (seven males and five females) were PhD holders of Applied Linguistics except one who majored in English Literature, but they were teaching students taking content courses (e.g., medical courses, nursing, and dentistry) due to their professional expertise in the English language. We selected the instructors through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Table 1 details the profile of the participants. Thus, the participants of the study were English teachers who taught technical English to students of content areas (see Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). Moreover, the approval of the participants was obtained before starting the data collection and they were assured that ethical considerations of maintaining their anonymity would be strictly observed to avoid subsequent repercussions.

### **3.3. Design and data collection**

The study was methodologically informed by the narrative inquiry as it helps obtain a detailed understanding of teachers' historicity and present functioning (Barkhuizen, 2016), which is suitable for exploring EAP practitioners' intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup emotions.



Narrative inquiry has been adopted as a rigorous methodology in examining language teachers' present emotions and previous emotional experiences (e.g., Golombek & Doran, 2014; Song, 2016). In line with the theoretical framework of the study, two research methods were used: Written questionnaires and narrative frames.

***Written questionnaires:*** In order to gain insight into the practitioners' emotions and identities, we designed a written questionnaire to be completed by the practitioners. The questions were informed by the literature on EAP practitioner identities (Atai et al., 2018; Tao & Gao, 2018) and teacher emotions (Zembylas, 2002). The questionnaire involved queries about the practitioners' self-understanding, benefits and challenges of EAP and their association with emotions/identities, the frequent emotions they experience as EAP practitioners, and EAP-related aspects that influence their emotions and identities most (Appendix A). It also expanded on the teachers' narrative frames (see below) to gain a more detailed understanding of their emotions and identity construction. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we forwarded the questionnaire to the practitioners and they completed it on their own. Thus, we consulted the practitioners and arranged the details of the questionnaire protocol. The practitioners could respond to the questions either in Persian (L1) or English. They could also either write or audio-record their answers. All of the practitioners wrote their responses to the questions in English.

***Narrative frames:*** In order to expand on the data from the questionnaire, we designed a narrative frame to elicit the practitioners' responses in greater depth. The rigor of narrative frames lies in the point that they "provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376). This characteristic could prompt the practitioners' recollection of their emotional experiences, and help with capturing the heterogeneity of their identities (Ding & Campion, 2016). The focus of the narrative frames was on the practitioners' emotional experiences and contributions to their identity construction. Along these lines, we examined the most positive and negative emotional experiences of the practitioners, which could root in various personal, professional, and sociocultural resonances (Zembylas, 2003). In line with Ding (2019) and Zembylas' (2002) framework, the teachers were asked to share an emotional experience that could relate to personal, institutional, and sociocultural issues of teaching EAP in Iran, although they could share more than one narrative.

### 3.4. Researcher positionality

Regarding the significance of the researcher's role in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014), the researchers played different roles across different stages of the study. The first researcher collaborated in writing different parts of the paper and conceptualizing different sections. The second researcher collected the data. The third researcher wrote different parts of the paper. After collecting the data, the researchers read the data several times and developed separate codes. These codes were put against each other to develop neat categories and themes. These observations were met in accordance with an insider perspective in regard to study design, conduction, and composition as we are familiar with the Iranian context of higher education.

### 3.5. Data analysis

The data were thematically analyzed (Creswell, 2014) to delineate the categories fitting the theoretical framework of Zembylas (2002). In this sense, several steps were followed based on a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the transcribed data from the teachers' written responses were read several times to develop an initial understanding of their nature. Second, the initial themes emerging from the data were written down along with the specific extracts that reflected the theme. It must be pointed out that we had in mind the three levels of emotions Zembylas (2002) delineated (i.e., interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intergroup levels) based on which the emerging codes were thematized. Third, the initial themes were refined through constant-comparison and integrative engagement with the main data set to develop the major themes. At this stage, the data from both data sources (i.e., written questionnaires and narrative frames) were analyzed against each other to develop more inclusive themes. For example, when a code from the questionnaire and one from the frame were similar in terms of the content, they were subsumed under the same category.

Fourth, the themes were analyzed against the three levels of Zembylas's (2002) model to fit in the major themes. After several rounds of theme refinement, the major categories per level were finalized. We also consulted a qualitative researcher to check the categorizations of the codes across the three layers of the framework. There were few disagreements, which were resolved by discussion. In addition, it must be mentioned that across the data analysis stages, the codes were cross-checked by the researchers, and also the

researchers discussed various issues related to how to analyze the data to enhance the credibility of the interpretations.

## 4. Findings

The analysis of the questionnaires and narrative frames revealed threads across the three levels of the theoretical framework as:

- intrapersonal (recognition from the learners and knowledge inadequacy),
- interpersonal (practitioners as agents of criticality and institutional pressures), and
- intergroup (socio-economic impediments, hollow prestige, and religious predicaments).

These themes exerted particular bearings on the practitioners' emotions and identities, as detailed below. Figure 1 shows the schematic representation of the findings.

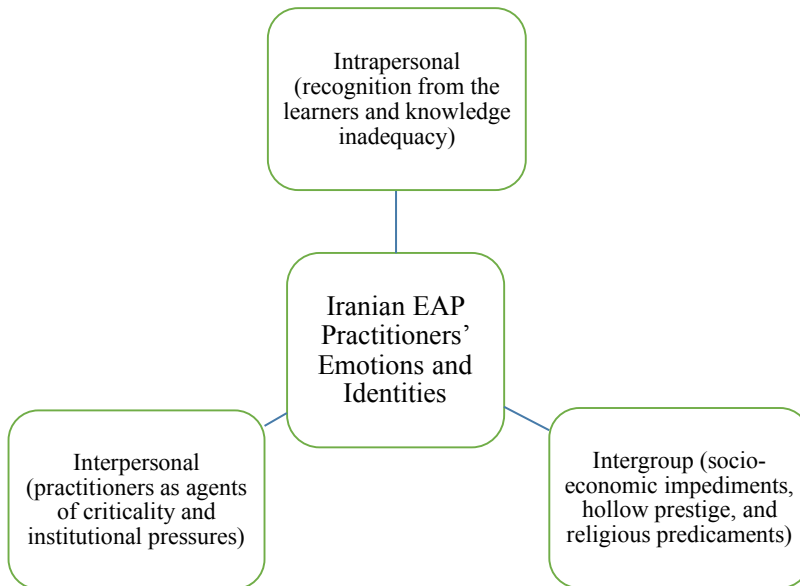


Figure 1. Iranian EAP practitioners' emotions and identities

## 4.1. Intrapersonal level

### 4.1.1. *Recognition from the learners*

One of the major factors contributing to the practitioners' positive emotions was the students' acknowledgment of their efforts. The recognition varied from the classroom-level appreciation of the students to their positive feedback on the practitioners and their instruction outside the class: "It really makes me happy when the students come to my room and thank me for the effort I put to work" (T5, Questionnaire, Extract 1). The practitioners narrated stories of recognition that featured their happiness, satisfaction, and enjoyment from their functioning. Such a recognition had created positive self-perceptions in the practitioners and motivated them to develop personalized understandings of themselves as teachers keeping up with standards of professionalism. For example, in extract 2 below, T10 narrates a positive incident that marks the students' recognition of her efforts on a special day. She characterizes this recognition in "influential" and "worthwhile" terms, which made her "feel precious and motivated" and in turn contributed to reformulations in the way she has come to view her students and her identity as a professional EAP practitioner:

The most positive emotional event I have experienced in my university classes has been when my students decided to hold a small party on teacher's day. This event is important because it made me feel that as a teacher I was influential and worthwhile to them. It made me feel precious and motivated to be persistent in developing professionally as a teacher. It created changes in my understanding of students because until that day I had not thought that my students notice my efforts and are grateful to me and I decided to develop a more positive attitude toward my students. (Narrative Frame, Extract 3)

### 4.1.2. *Knowledge inadequacy*

The practitioners narrated stories that showed how their lack of subject content expertise had agitated the classroom atmosphere. This problem was primarily associated with inadequate mastery over specialized terminology the students brought to the fore and had created identity tensions for the practitioners: "Sometimes, the students ask a word related to cardiovascular areas that shock me as I do not know their meaning and this makes me feel ashamed and incompetent" (T1, Questionnaire, Extract 4). Besides experiencing sadness, shame, and frustration, the practitioners held that such

moments had effaced their personal motivation and professional identity as legitimate EAP practitioners. Knowledge was viewed as highly significant in the extent to which students believe in instructors and successful course progression in the long run: "In my opinion, when you have great mastery over the content, students see you as a source of power and listen to what you say" (T2, Questionnaire, Extract 5). For instance, in extract below (6), T7 mentions how she has experienced shame and frustration due to her inability to respond to a student's question. The practitioner describes such moments as sites for experiencing frustration and demotivation, which contribute to the way students perceive EAP practitioners. Her reference to "this is bad for a university teacher" further indicates that such emotional challenges devalue the practitioners' identity, especially in the eyes of the students:

The most negative emotional event I have experienced in my university classes has been when I did not know the exact meaning of the vocabulary one of my students asked. This event is important because it made me feel that as a teacher I should know the meaning of all the necessary words. I could not control this unpredictable event, but I felt ashamed and frustrated. Such moments have always made me frustrated and demotivated, and I kind of feel that my students do not take me as serious anymore. This is very bad for a university teacher. (Narrative Frame, Extract 6)

Thus, at a personal level, the practitioners experienced both positive and negative emotional incidents that have primarily influenced their identities. This identity had in turn contributed to the practitioners' motivation relative to the positivity and negativity of the emotional experiences in shaping their professional self as legitimate EAP practitioners.

## 4.2. Interpersonal level

### 4.2.1. *Practitioners as agents of criticality*

A dominant theme among the practitioners' responses pertained to conceptualizing their own role as not just teachers, but as individuals who can contribute to students' academic and social growth. The major reason for such an attitude was the importance of not being "limited to class and helping students decide about important life matters" (T12, Questionnaire, Extract 7). This attitude was viewed as helping the practitioners feel agentive in their professional career in terms of moving the students beyond academic affairs and cultivating in them criticality toward various socio-educational issues: "I feel

power when I move my students beyond what they just see and know as they should become more critical” (T12, Questionnaire, Extract 8). Satisfaction and composure were the major emotional consequences of such efforts, which were viewed as central to practitioners’ work in higher education. For example, in the following extract, T1 gives primacy to creating criticality in his learners as a way to his own feelings of effectiveness and constructiveness:

One of the most positive experiences for me was when I attempted to develop the perceptions of criticality in my students. I gave them power to have voice in the course and it was really thriving. Although some problems occurred, this experience and course made me develop positive emotions about myself and my students in a way that I felt that I am an effective teacher. (Narrative Frame, Extract 9)

T5 considered giving voice to his learners to foster their autonomy as his professional responsibility, which makes him feel proud of himself:

I have responsibilities that go way above simply teaching the content and the subject matter. I need to facilitate learning by enabling my students to voice their ideas and stay on top of their own learning. This makes me feel proud of myself as a teacher. (Questionnaire, Extract 10)

#### ***4.2.2. Institutional pressures***

One of the most dominant threads among the practitioners’ responses pertained to the existing pressure in their universities. The pressure was viewed as primarily stemming from ineffective educational policies, which in turn influenced the practitioners’ motivation: “Sometimes you see issues at the universities that make you question your own personhood, motivation, and energy to teach” (T5, Questionnaire, Extract 11). Exercising a top-down policy in material selection and syllabus enactment, and an inappropriate competitive atmosphere were two corollary themes of such pressure. Regarding the former, the practitioners argued that they have low agency in selecting course content and “most of the materials are assigned by higher-order decision-makers” (T7, Questionnaire, Extract 12). This condition was perceived as negatively influencing the practitioners’ sense of fulfillment and disbelief in their abilities to craft tailor-made activities that reflect their personalized understanding of professional practice in higher education. T12 referred to such a top-down system in evaluation and coursebook selection, which bother him and restrict his agency:

The unnecessary restrictions about the evaluation system or pre-defined course books are what goes on my nerve. They limit you and do not let you go on according to what you find necessary. As if you know what you shall do or have a clear understanding of the goals and the way you can grasp them, but some external barriers avoiding you. That is awful. (Questionnaire, Extract 13)

A subsidiary consequence of systemic pressure was creating a competitive atmosphere that influences the practitioners' emotional vulnerability and collegial identity, which in turn contribute to their functioning in other social roles: "As we are university instructors, we should always try to engage in publishing and do track-and-field, which makes us invest less in the quality of works. Sometimes I cannot devote my time to my family, which makes me sad" (T3, Questionnaire, Extract 14). The practitioners lamented over such a condition and considered it as igniting their becoming individuals who get angry easily and react unfavorably in their relationships with students and colleagues. The major element in such emotions and identities was the demands of the competitive atmosphere to promote professional ranking, which make the practitioners prioritize competition over personal dimensions of their career. For instance, in the following extract, T5 views competition as central to university work. He also makes mention of funds and grants, which are necessary for performing better than colleagues. Reference to "annoying" and "drains my energy" indicate that such a competitive climate has a negative impact on his other responsibilities:

A lot of what happens at a university is often affected by competition. There are competitive grants and funds that one needs to constantly apply for. You need to outperform your colleagues and display your abilities all the time and it does not matter what quality your work has. This is sometimes annoying and drains my energy for my other responsibilities. (Questionnaire, Extract 15)

Thus, the practitioners' interpersonal emotional experiences were tied to their agency and relatedness in response to competing discourses. Regarding the former, the practitioners conceptualized their role as beyond knowledge delivery toward promoting criticality in the students to function as socially meaningful individuals. As to their relatedness, the practitioners referred to the existing top-down educational system that limits their agency and creates unfavorable consequences in their relationship with colleagues and sense of professionalism more generally. Most notably, the context-specific issue of

destructive competition was pointed out, which was viewed as shaping both the practitioners' negative emotions and interpersonal connectivity.

### 4.3. Intergroup level

#### 4.3.1. *Socio-economic impediments*

Most of the practitioners situated EAP in Iran within its sociocultural prism and made reference to multiple hurdles impeding effective EAP instruction. Among such hurdles were social and economic impediments, which were viewed as influencing their status as higher education professionals, emotional security, and well-being. As to social impediments, the practitioners took issue with the general climate of the society in negatively influencing the practitioners' and students' emotions and identities. Most notably, the lack of a quality system to screen the students were viewed as demotivating for instructors and students: "What upsets me most is seeing our universities decline in quality and open their doors to those who do not deserve to be there. For this reason, I refrain from teaching at universities or institutions which are business-like and have been established primarily to make profit" (T7, Questionnaire, Extract 16). T8 referred to the social climate of the society as negatively influencing talented students' performance, which in turn contributed to his own depression and sense of powerlessness as an effective practitioner: "I become depressed when I see some of my talented students stop studying the way I expected them to. This makes me feel that as a teacher I am not powerful enough to help everyone and to change the worsening status quo in my country" (Questionnaire, Extract 17).

The economic side of EAP practitioners' work was viewed as directly linked to their grit and emotional understanding of the workplace. The practitioners considered economic adequacy as fundamental to their perseverance and investment in upgrading their knowledge, which could in turn contribute to the quality of students' learning. Nonalignment between workload and salary was the major objection of the practitioners, which was viewed as connected to the general picture of EAP instruction in Iran. For example, T12 characterized the status of EAP practitioners in Iran through the lens of economic problems and referred to its role in his anger and disappointment:

Whenever I think about the economic issues, negative emotions resurface. I remember that once I talked about this issue to higher-order decision-



makers, and they had their own alibis. And the expectations are really high. I don't know what they think when they pay no attention to the economic side of our work. These issues really irritate me (Narrative Frame, Extract 18)

#### 4.3.2. *Hollow prestige*

An interesting theme among the three practitioners' responses was their emphasis on the lack of a significant difference between language schools and university career: "To me being a university teacher or an English teacher at institutes is not much different" (T3, Questionnaire, Extract 19). Conversely, there were teachers who mentioned the higher prestige of *being* a university instructor. While prestige was viewed as important at the university level, it was considered as insignificant at the macro-level of the society. T2 referred to the positive sense being a university practitioner gives her, yet she described such a status as "not worth it" (Questionnaire, Extract 20). Prestige was also defined in light of the social status of university practitioners, which has gradually subsided in social interactions of Iranian people. For example, T7 referred to the dynamics of the society as influential in the respect university instructors receive in other social situations:

One benefit of being a university teacher, which, quite sadly, is disappearing due to the emerging cultural and economic dynamics in the Iranian society, is being held in high regard by other people, especially those who are also faculty members and thus can receive preferential treatment in public institutions like banks and other government offices. (Questionnaire, Extract 21)

This condition was considered as negatively contributing to the way EAP practitioners perceive themselves as venerated individuals in society. For example, T3 related this lack of prestige to political and governmental policies, which has created a substantial shift in her understanding of university instructors' self:

The meaning of a university teacher has changed for me. Now, a university teacher to me is just a teacher who teaches at university and nothing more; it's not even prestigious, maybe because of the policies of the government toward universities and university students. (Questionnaire, Extract 22)

#### 4.3.3. *Religious predicaments*

Religion was considered to be a substantial factor in the practitioners' professional functioning, emotional conflicts, and identity as a professional

EAP practitioner. In this regard, they referred to certain religious rules that have crawled into the way practitioners are regarded and treated. The restriction was not limited to female practitioners only, and male practitioners also referred to the impact of religious rules on their professional emotions and identities. For example, T1 (male) narrated an experience in which his clothes were not compatible with the university rules according to which he had been banned from entering the university. In the following extract, he mentioned this point because his coat has been “too short”. This occurrence has been emotionally disappointing for him:

The dress code was the most bothering one. I remember once they didn't let me enter the university because my coat was “too short” according to them. That was really disappointing and I had to go all the way back home because someone that day was not in a good mood. (Questionnaire, Extract 23)

T10 (female) referred to a similar problem vis-à-vis her dress code, which must not be provocative. She eloquently lamented over “plain uniforms and scarf in dark colors”, which negatively influence her comfort and sense of femininity:

As I live in a religious and Islamic country, there are restrictive dress codes with respect to our clothes style and color. As a female teacher I have to cover up and dress formally. I have to wear plain uniforms and scarf in dark colors which really bothers me and makes feel downgraded. I'm not allowed to wear make-up at work and I'm under constant observation. (Questionnaire, Extract 24)

Thus, taken in a macroscopic scale, emotions were viewed as profoundly rooted in the way higher education is understood in Iran and its power relations. In this regard, the practitioners interpreted their negative emotions not only in light of policy and planning in education, but also as a function of social dynamics of the society. Reference to socio-economic impediments, the diminishing prestige of university instructors, and religious barriers was contributive to the practitioners' negative emotions. Yet, negative emotions were not the only by-product of such problems and they were perceived as sanctioning the practitioners' professional legitimacy, investment in their professional work, and self-understanding as a human being.

## 5. Discussion

The data presented in this study indicated that the practitioners' emotions are linked to various aspects of their professionalism and contribute to their identities in complex ways relative to personal, professional, and sociocultural idiosyncrasies. The findings showed that the practitioners have experienced both positive and negative emotional experiences, which have borne certain meanings for their identity construction thus, the definition of emotions and identity construction in this study captures how personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors shape EAP teachers' emotions and identity construction.

With regard to positive emotions, recognition in the eyes of students was viewed as important in the practitioners' satisfaction and motivation to align their identity with professionalism standards. This finding shows the significant role of students in EAP practitioners' identities as professionals who maintain their identity in updating their knowledge to provide more quality instruction. Tao and Gao (2018) refer to similar points regarding the importance of persistent professional development among ESP practitioners, which "enable them to assert themselves as ESP teachers at the University" (p. 6). In this sense, it seems that the practitioners use such positive emotional experiences as lenses through which they align identity standards with professional demands to act responsively. The triad of positive emotions, identity standards, and professional functioning characterizes EAP practitioners' career and its complex nature, with students acting as the mediating role in striking balance among these three components. These experiences could also occur to many EAP teachers across other contexts, yet what coloring they take and how they influence the teachers' professional practice seems to need further attention from EAP researchers in other contexts.

Additionally, the practitioners viewed their role as beyond delivering the content toward higher-order aspects of professionalism, especially developing critical students, which well-aligns with a critical conceptualization of language teachers' identities and emotions in fostering students who can develop transformative characteristics (De Costa et al., 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). The practitioners' satisfaction and composure in this regard were defined in light of their agency as university instructors. In this sense, being a university instructor seems to function as the agentic position that enables EAP practitioners to develop criticality in

their students and claim agentic identities for themselves. As Iranian EAP practitioners are often institutionally limited to foster higher-order competencies in the students (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018), it might be that practitioners' agentic attempts to develop critical students is a reflection of their own inner voices. In this sense, it seems that being critical in the Iranian context is not primarily favorable as due to ideological discourses, teaching in Iran "is likely to provide substantial challenges to some EFL teachers and to present them with both political and personal conflicts" (Eslamdoost et al., 2020, p. 4). Along these lines, it appears that while the practitioners might not be able to take the initiative to personally step toward transformation, they exercise vicarious agency to empower their students to become transformative individuals. These findings imply that agency should be considered as a central element of EAP teacher education courses in that although EAP teachers may not be able to tackle grand policies, they can be educated how to show agency in the classroom and at various institutional levels to positively contribute to educational effectiveness.

The practitioners, however, expressed negative emotions that exceeded the positive emotions in terms of quantity and contributions for identity construction. In this regard, inadequate technical knowledge was viewed as a source of experiencing negative emotions. Besides the point that this problem aroused negative emotions in the practitioners, problematic situations seem to have negatively shaped their identities. As practitioners have certain identities in being university instructors, when they cannot respond to the students' questions effectively, they experience negative emotions and doubt their professional legitimacy in being able to fulfill the requirements that define their identity as higher-education practitioners. This aspect of teacher professional identity has been emphasized in the previous literature on general English teachers (e.g., Benesch, 2020) in that teachers attempt to align their identity with situated understandings to claim and subsequently adopt certain identities for themselves (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). As the issue of technical knowledge may be a conundrum for many EAP teachers across various contexts (see Atai et al., 2022), it seems that more partnership between EAP teachers and decision-makers who could alleviate such problems is needed in order to reduce the emotional tensions that EAP teachers are likely to face.

It seems that such an identity creates what Zembylas (2003) calls "emotional rules" (p. 196) for EAP practitioners. That is, once the practitioners conceive of themselves as university instructors, this self-understanding linearizes

their role definition as knowledgeable instructors and, thus, sanctions the identity they craft for/from themselves as omnipotent individuals. The consequence of such an identity is that when their knowledge is problematized, the experience is interpreted in emotional terms and questions they identify they have constructed for themselves. This self-understanding, however, needs to align with the nature of EAP work as, according to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), in many situations, EAP students may know the content better than the practitioner.

Such an emotional labor was also a function of institutional demands and particularities. There is a large body of knowledge on the effect of such institutional demands on Iranian EAP practitioners (e.g., Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018) discuss such restrictions in detail and propose several alternatives to bring about change in the system, arguing that "at the time being it might be considered more as wishful thinking than an agenda for change" (p. 41). Educational policy and planning in Iran constrain EAP practitioners' work from various professional aspects. One such challenge in this study was the new competitive culture that appears to allegedly motivate the practitioners toward professional growth, yet it is virtually creating psychological and professional anomalies in the practitioners. Emotional vulnerability and collegial tensions were considered as side effects of such a competitive climate, which come to negatively influence the practitioners' personal and professional lives. We argue that besides the technical issues that should be focused on in EAP teacher education courses, such courses should pay attention to the role of institutional, non-pedagogical challenges that are likely to complicate EAP teachers' effective identity construction and experiencing positive emotions. This way, teacher education can become responsive not just in pedagogical terms, but also at the level of institutional issues.

The above issue was intertwined with the economic dimension of Iranian EAP practitioners' work. This side of practitioners' work was viewed as central to their emotional states such as anger and disappointment, and to their investment in contributing to educational accountability (for similar results in the Chinese context see Tao & Gao, 2018). The role of economic inadequacy in EAP practitioners' ill-being is critical as it could materialize in the extent to which they invest energy in their career to claim the identity of an effective educator. Economic safety of Iranian EAP practitioners is tied to the policies of the MSRT and this sector is in turn under the control of

the government in paying the salary and signing the contracts. Such a condition could well explain why the practitioners considered the prestige associated with university instructors as superficial, and some considered university career as little different from teaching at language schools. Indeed, it seems that the social values attributed to university instructors are subsiding in the context of Iran. In such a condition, when EAP practitioners situate their work within the macro-level dynamics of the society, they are socially becoming less-venerated individuals and professionally becoming disappointed by what they imagined and what they encounter in reality.

The practitioners in our study lamented over recruiting a large number of university students into higher education. This governmental policy was initiated around 2010 and was followed by the entrance of a huge number of students to Azad and Payame-Noor (higher education systems in which the candidates pay a fee for their education) and state universities. This condition gradually led to the emergence of a generation of students who did not go through academically-sound screening filters. The policy primarily influenced our practitioners' agency in that they can little take the initiative to create change in students' effective development, which had also made them feel as incompetent individuals. These findings align with Zembylas (2002, 2003) and Benesch (2017, 2020) who argue that top-down policies are likely to negatively influence teachers' emotions and identities. For our teachers, such an effect is realized in agency constraints and emotions of powerlessness, depression, lack of emotional security, and low well-being. These negative emotions in turn influenced the teachers' identity in that they could not craft the identity of agentic practitioners who could have a significant share in educational growth.

Another major impediment in EAP practitioners' work was the religious beliefs that have shaped educational policy and planning in Iran and have negatively influenced the practitioners' emotional states and personal-professional identities. This condition is not novel in Iran, as since the establishment of the Islamic revolution in 1979, religious ideas have been embedded in various policy documents (Nazari & Hashemi, 2020). The restrictions such an ideology seems to influence the way practitioners see themselves as professionals and even more as human beings, as our findings showed. It would be easier to discuss this finding in emotional than identity terms as the consequences of banning a practitioner from entering the university and disrespecting their basic needs might be emotionally

regulatable but may exercise long-lasting tensions that extend to the whole range of practitioner identities. It seems that, against our will, we have to crisscross the discussion and turn a blind eye on the main issue, as suggestions are neither useful for practitioners nor of value to policy-makers. The only useful point might be that the practitioners train themselves to regulate their emotions in such situations as the power relations, competing discourses, and dominant ideologies are beyond grappling with. We would like to emphasize that agency and resistance, as discussed in critical discussions of teacher emotions (e.g., Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2002), are necessarily restricted to Iranian EAP practitioners' classes, and other discourses, especially religious implications, are beyond these practitioners' potency to problematize. Although the challenges our EAP teachers experienced were mostly defined based on contextual descriptions of EAP instruction in Iran, teachers from other contexts could also experience such challenges as far as policy and planning act dominantly and coercively (see Ding, 2019). Thus, further research on how sociocultural challenges problematize EAP teachers' emotions and identity construction would provide useful insights into their professionalism based on contextual particularities.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the under-researched area of EAP practitioners' emotions and identities. The findings of the study indicated that Iranian EAP practitioners' emotions are partly in connection with their classroom experiences and are largely defined by macro-structural localities of teaching EAP in Iran. The main finding of this study is the huge gap between EAP practitioners' identity and contextual idiosyncrasies that were profoundly colored by a range of negative emotions Iranian EAP practitioners experience. Such emotional challenges are definitive in sanctioning the identities practitioners construct. Lamentably, it seems that Iranian EAP practitioner identity construction is more under the duress of suppressive ideologies, oppressive discourses, and powerful forces than the practitioners' agentive role in such construction. In this sense, unpacking the emotions of EAP teachers contributed to understanding how emotions feature as a significant element of the teachers' identity construction, which is a novel dimension of the study.

The findings of the study open up novel ways to better understand what Ding and Campion (2016) called the heterogeneity of EAP practitioners' work. A large part of this heterogeneity for Iranian EAP practitioners' identities is the wide range of emotions they experience most of which are, unfortunately, negative emotions. This point could probably be best captured in the narrative of one of the practitioners who said: "Most of us are not feeling well". It is yet to understand to what extent can Iranian EAP practitioners proceed with the positive feedback they receive from their students. We now know that these instructors are striving to fulfill their professional roles by their understanding of professional standards of conduct. However, it seems that the range of mediating discourses complicating the practitioners' work are more constitutive of their work than positive, perhaps fleeting, personal emotions. Such an understanding requires longitudinal research on EAP practitioners and their emotions and identities. More specifically, examining practitioner burnout could be an effective research agenda in contexts similar to Iran.

We eschew providing implications for EAP policy and planning, as we believe that such an undertaking would be in vain. Indeed, change should be sought where there is room for change. Most of the Iranian references cited in this study have provided the necessary suggestions for change, yet there is little recognition of and attention to such suggestions. The major reasons lie in the fact that, as also argued by Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018), EAP experts are not the major educational decision-makers; there is little professional investment in the preparation of the practitioners; there is little economic and educational investment in EAP practitioner professional well-being and continuing professional development, and there is little ear to hear the voice. We believe that (at least Iranian) EAP practitioner emotions and identities must be interpreted within this condition, as these emotions and identities have clear implications for the practitioners' work. Nonetheless, what is heard loudly is the complaint of many EAP practitioners who can offer fresh educational ideas, but are either self-oppressed or other-suppressed.

Future research may also consider observing the teachers' classes to document the EAP teachers' real-time practices and use them as a door into their emotions and identity construction. Moreover, future research may recruit a greater number of teachers to obtain a better understanding of how emotions and identity are influenced by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural issues. Of particular note here is that future research may engage in cross-contextual comparison between EAP teachers in different



parts of the world to examine any similarities and differences in their emotions and identity construction, and how contextual challenges shape these two key constructs differentially.

Article history:

Received 30 April 2022

Received in revised form 30 January 2023

Accepted 31 January 2023

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## Appendix A

Written questionnaire

1. How do you describe yourself as an EAP teacher? What does being an EAP teacher mean?
2. What are some of the challenges of being an EAP teacher? How do they influence your feelings about yourself, your work, your relationship with students, etc.?
3. What are some of the benefits of being an EAP teacher? How do they influence your feelings about yourself, your work, your relationship with students, etc.?
4. What are the most frequent emotions (both positive and negative) you experience as an EAP teacher? What feeling do these emotions give you about yourself and your work? How do they influence you?
5. What aspects of your work as an EAP teacher upset and arouse you and your emotions most?
6. In the frame, you talked about XXX. Could you please explain more about this? How did it influence your emotions and self-perceptions?