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## Non-native English Teachers' Well-being: TESOL Teachers' Big and Small Stories about the Presence of Meaning in their Lives within the Discourse of Sanctions

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### ABSTRACT

Combining teachers' big and small stories through a hybrid lens, the present study sought to examine the presence of meaning, as a component of well-being, in Iranian English language teachers within the discourse of sanctions, which could shape their positionality towards TESOL. Two themes were extracted: the emergence of critical hope and a shift towards plurilingual practices of agency. While challenging social injustice and colonial projects such as native-speakerism, critical hope created the possibility of transformation as it enabled teachers to evaluate their position towards the existing situation, acknowledge their relative agency, and implement new pedagogical practices. Valuing plurilingual identities of non-native teachers centered on the possibilities of empowerment and resilience fostering teachers' agency within the discourse of sanctions and othering. Sanctions were turning points that helped participants negotiate different kinds of teacher identity through the fluid and context-based use of diverse linguistic repertoires and re-visit their conception of TESOL.

**Keywords:** big stories; presence of meaning; small stories; TESOL teachers; well-being

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## Introduction

Language teacher identity is one of the thought-provoking topics of enquiry in English language teaching with regard to the way teacher identity affects the nature of teaching practices, teacher's agency and investment, and language learners' process of learning (Afreen & Norton, 2024; Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024; Uştuk & Yazan, 2024). The existing conceptions of language teacher identity mainly aim at legitimizing professional dimensions of teacher identity, while little attention has been given to personal dimension and experience shaping the development of teacher identity (Bukor, 2015). But, generally, language teacher identity reflects some features of their personal identity (Richards, 2023; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024; Yazan et al., 2023). Also, teachers' practices are the result of the way they decide to invest and take actions based on their personal experiences (Pishghadam et al., 2022). Nguyen (2017) believed that the personal dimension of teacher identity has been almost ignored, while the process of teaching is remarkably shaped by life factors of teachers such as their well-being. Defining the concept of well-being, as a sense of happiness and meaning, Mercer (2021, 2023) explicated that TESOL teachers' well-being is a core dimension of their personal identity that should receive priority because it helps TESOL teachers enact creative teaching practices.

Broadly speaking, Mercer (2021) acknowledged that language teachers' well-being "is completely invisible from policy, professional discourse, and research" (p. 18), although she demonstrated the positive impact of teachers' well-being on their quality of teaching. Seligman (2011) referred to well-being as a multi-dimensional concept, which is composed of positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). In TESOL, MacIntyre et al. (2019) studied the relationship between English language teachers' personality traits and well-being. They stated that personality traits such as agreeableness, openness to experiences, conscientiousness, and emotional stability significantly correlate with language teachers' well-being. Taking an ecological stance, Mairitsch et al. (2021) probed into the well-being of pre-service language teachers. They made mention of language teachers' motivation, enthusiasm for teaching, and positive relations with learners as factors enhancing their well-being, while they report other factors, such as workload, time pressure, poor societal appreciation, and bureaucracy as factors negatively affecting their teacher participants' well-being. The roles English language teachers' emotions play in shaping their identities has recently attracted the attention of some researchers (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). But meaning, as one of the core elements of teachers' well-being, has received little attention.

Defining teachers' identity as the process of discovery of their own agencies and voices, Izadinia (2018) pointed out that identity development should be regarded as a meaning-making process whereby individuals seek to find meanings of their own selves. She argued that cultivating a deep sense of identity through the presence of meaning in teachers' lives enriches their knowledge. Luttenberg et al. (2013) highlighted the value of the presence of meaning in teachers' lives and maintained that, through the process of meaning making, teachers "navigate between external pressures and their own views and practices" (p. 291). Thus, with regard to the importance of meaning as a dimension of the PERMA shaping language teachers' well-being, this narrative enquiry sought to examine the presence of meaning in non-native TESOL teachers' lives, that is, their attempts to seek meaning for their lives and teaching practices. The study was conducted in Iran, which has experienced an increased tension with the U.S. due to the U.S. trade and financial sanctions over Iran's nuclear programme. As Mousavian and Mousavian (2018) pointed out, these sanctions were instated in 2018 after the withdrawal of America from the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). They explicated that, according to the JCPOA that was signed in 2015, Iran limited its nuclear program to peaceful purposes in return for selling oil on international markets. But, in 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew America from the deal and imposed sanctions, which broadened the gap between the two countries and affected the lives of all Iranians, because these sanctions adversely affected Iran's

economy. English language teachers, like any other group, have been impacted by the sanctions. As Pavlenko (2003) asserted, socio-political events provoke major changes in foreign language teaching policies and practices that are closely linked to the development and reconstruction of teachers' identities. We believe that Pavlenko's argument holds water about Iranian language teachers in the current situation in which they have been sanctioned and isolated. Moreover, language teachers' well-being is a product of the socio-political, cultural, and interactional ecologies (Mercer, 2023). And, inviting language teachers to narrate their stories within the socio-political discourse of sanctions is guided by an ecological perspective of language teachers' well-being. Mercer (2023) argued that, for well-being, taking such a perspective means considering language teachers as conscious agents and enabling "both its individual and social nature to emerge" (p. 1056).

To carry out this study, we sought to combine big and small stories through hybrid lens, which, as Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) mentioned, "can represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry" (p. 223). After collecting the data, the narrated stories were analysed in light of the relevant literature on teachers' Meaning in Life (MIL) as well as the context of the study to examine how Iranian English language teachers make meaning of their lives within the discourse of sanctions and isolation, which can shape their positionality towards TESOL.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In their review of research studies on psychological aspects of language education, Mercer et al. (2016) pointed out that psychological aspects of TESOL teachers' well-being, including the PERMA dimensions, have not received a great deal of attention. They defined the first core element of PERMA, namely language teachers' positive emotions (P) as emotions such as warmth, enjoyment, and pleasure that "can facilitate the broadening of perspectives by triggering their curiosity and desire to creatively explore innovative teaching methods" (p. 221). Engagement (E) is defined as "a state of complete absorption in whatever one is doing" (MacIntyre et al., 2019, p. 28). Relationships (R) are composed of respectable and trustworthy relationships between teachers and their colleagues or between teachers and learners whereby they can experience a sense of belonging. Moreover, Accomplishment (A) consists of a sense of achievement and self-efficacy. To illuminate the dimension of Meaning (M), Mercer et al. (2016) explained that meaning is a purpose or value beyond the self, such as each person's contribution to society and people, which makes the teaching process meaningful. Specifically addressing meaning in life, Steger et al. (2006) maintained that "it is surprising that the search for meaning in life has been all but neglected" (p. 82). However, interpreting meaning as the critical aspect of well-being, they made mention of the roles the presence of meaning plays in cultivating human potential, raising happiness, and reducing distress, anxiety, and depression. Various empirical studies were conducted on TESOL teachers' well-being or meaning in life as a dimension of their well-being, which are reviewed in this section.

The first study was a quantitative study carried out by Li (2018) to explore university teachers' well-being. He selected his participants from among university teachers. Furthermore, Li examined the relationship between his participants' meaning in life (MIL), well-being, and psychological capital, which entailed psychological qualities such as self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience. The findings of Li's study showed that university teachers' psychological capital predicts their MIL since teachers' positive psychological qualities equate with their ability to positively evaluate life events, which, in turn, provides the possibility of more experience of MIL. Accordingly, it can be inferred that psychological capital affects teachers' well-being through MIL in the sense that MIL plays the role of a mediator, which associates psychological capital with university teachers' well-being. In a similar vein, using an ex-post-facto design, Chamani et al.

(2023) explored the relationship between language teachers' occupational self-efficacy, job satisfaction, meaning at work, and their well-being. They reported a positive relation between language teachers' job satisfaction, occupational self-efficacy, and well-being. They explicated that meaning at work is a significant predictor of language teachers' well-being and argued that giving teachers the possibility to engage in meaningful activities such as curriculum development and decision-making processes helps them find meaning in their teaching practices.

The second quantitative study was carried out by MacIntyre et al. (2019) on an international sample of English language teachers to explore the relationship between the Big Five personality traits, PERMA, and various types of stressors. The Big Five personality traits involve extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. Furthermore, MacIntyre et al. addressed the two types of stressors: a) chronic stressors such as insufficient income or sub-standard housing, and b) daily hassles, which are minimally frustrating or disturbing events occurring in everyday relationships and transactions. The participants of their study consisted of 47 English language teachers who taught English in the context of higher education. Their findings confirmed that there is a consistent relationship between teachers' well-being and their personality traits. The results showed that finding meaning in one's own life is significantly related to those personality traits that "predispose a teacher to be kind and emotionally composed" (p. 32). Also, it was revealed that finding meaning in life is significantly correlated with conscientiousness, which is composed of dependability or the quality of being trustworthy and volition, as a predictor of effective job performance. In addition, Ismail et al. (2023) indicated that EFL teachers' well-being is constructed through interpersonal dynamics within language classes and referred to teachers' reflective teaching practices, emotion control, self-efficacy, and identity as significant indicators of their well-being.

The fourth relevant study, which adopted a qualitative methodology, was carried out by Mairitsch et al. (2021) to explore the well-being of English language teachers from Austria and the UK through a grounded theory study. Analysing their qualitative data, they concluded that some ecological factors such as work-life balance and finding meaning in life play a key role in shaping language teachers' well-being. They regarded meaning as a eudemonic component of well-being, which is conducive to teachers' happiness. Also, they explained that their participants' sense of meaning resulted from a feeling of energetic interest in teaching the foreign language, intrinsic motivational factors, and the sense of vocation through which social values and personal meanings are assigned to the process of teaching. Similarly, Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022) carried out a qualitative study to explore language teachers' well-being. Their participants included 15 in-service EFL teachers in the context of Iran, who were invited to share their views about factors shaping their well-being in the workplace through in-depth interviews. It was revealed that language teachers' well-being does not reside within their selves but is a quality of their relation with their learners, colleagues, and institutional authorities.

Similar to the qualitative studies reviewed above, we utilised a qualitative method to probe into English language teachers' well-being, although we specifically focused on the core element of meaning in life. Our participants were Iranian English language teachers who worked at Iranian universities and we sought to explore their presence of meaning during the period of American trade and financial sanctions over Iran's nuclear programme, which can be perceived as the process of Othering across the geographical and political borders (de Buitrago, 2015). According to Kubota (2001), "discursive practices of Othering, dichotomization of the Self and the Other, and legitimation of power relations between the Self and the Other echo a past-present continuity of the discourses of colonialism" (p. 9). Thus, it is highly important to examine the way English language teachers in Iran sought to make sense of their career within the discourse of American sanctions.

We should add that, to carry out a theoretically well-founded exploration, we particularly focused on meaning in life through a positive psychological framework, which was derived from Steger's (2011) conception of the presence of meaning. Offering a multi-faceted definition of MIL as one of the strengths that can contribute to the flourishing of human beings, Steger stated that meaning is "the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life" (p. 682). He indicated that MIL involves the two components of comprehension and purpose. While comprehension refers to individuals' ability to find a meaningful pattern and consistency in their lives, purpose includes the most valuable goals for which individuals strive. That is to say, comprehension encompasses the ability to make meaning and sense of one's own life, while purpose involves each individual person's main goals and ideals for life. Comprehending the meaning of life encompasses the ability to make sense of life as it is and unifies the three domains of understanding, including self-understanding, understanding niches and relationships within the world, and understanding the world around us. Also, purpose is the sense of direction which results in becoming an engaged person. Overall, comprehension and purpose establish the presence of meaning, which is "the sense made of, significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence" (Steger, 2006, p. 81). The current study sought to answer the following research question:

How did Iranian English language teachers find meaning in their lives within the discourse of sanctions applied by the United States of America, as an English-speaking country?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

To choose the participants, we purposively selected 18 English language teachers (M=10 and F=8). To gather data from a wider range of perspectives, we selected participants through the maximum variation sampling based on a range of variations in their academic degrees and orientations to teaching the English language. Patton (2001) defined maximum variation sampling as a strategy that "aims at capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation" (pp. 234-235). Our participants consisted of three associate professors, seven assistant professors with Ph.D. degrees, and eight adjunct English language teachers with either Ph.D. or Master's degrees. Furthermore, to check participants' orientations to teaching the English language, we asked them to share their syllabi, instructional materials of teaching and published articles with us. From among these 18 participants, three teachers strongly defended process-oriented approaches to designing and selecting course contents and materials. That is, they did not use a pre-determined syllabus. Entering into dialogue with these teachers, we realized that they developed their class syllabus retrospectively after negotiations with their learners. However, 11 participants strongly believed in product-oriented approaches to designing and selecting classroom contents and materials. Furthermore, the last four teachers explained that they preferred to blend the components and features of both approaches. We interviewed 18 teachers and after interviewing the eighteenth teacher, we reached the saturation point which made us empirically confident that no new codes would occur in the new interviews and additional data would not lead to the identification of new themes. The demographic information of the participants is presented below:

Table 1  
*The Demographic Profile of the Participants (N = 18)*

Participants' characteristics	Frequency
Age	
30-35	4
35-40	8
45-50	3
50-60	3
Gender	
Male	10
Female	8
Teaching experience at universities	
More than five years	13
Between two and five years	3
Less than two years	2
Academic rank	
Faculty members	10
Adjunct teachers	8

### ***Methods of Data Collection***

The data were collected through both big and small stories because “only by integrating small story and big story perspectives, therefore, can we begin to tell the whole story of who we are” (Freeman, 2011, p. 114). As Sools (2013) explained, big stories involve research interviews conducted in a safe atmosphere created between the interviewer and the interviewee whereby the interviewer minimally interferes with the interviewee’s effort to tell their auto-biographical stories. However, as Bamberg (2006) argued, small stories are very short stories similar to ongoing conversations between peers, which are narrated in daily interactions and everyday conversations. In our study, big stories were collected through narrative interviews, while small stories were collected through interactive interviews in which both the interviewer and the interviewee shared their personal experiences in a developing relationship. Through narrative interviews, we avoided intervening when our participants were narrating their stories and allowed them to control the content and direction of interviews, while interactive interviews involved informal interactions through telephone conversations, informal chit-chat via the WhatsApp application, or short-distance car journeys. Triangulating through two different data sources is mainly suggested in qualitative studies to enhance the credibility and confirmability of findings since a possibility is created for verification of data from different sources against each other and the effect of data collectors’ bias is reduced. To strengthen the transferability of the study, detailed information was provided about participants, methods of data collection, and procedure.

### ***Procedure***

After choosing the participants, we started collecting the qualitative data through big and small stories. Initially, we conducted a narrative interview with each individual participant to hear his/her big story. According to Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016), four key phases are suggested for narrative interviews: a) an explanation about the interview process, b) interviewees’ narratives, c) a questioning process, and d) a conclusion. In the first stage, we illuminated the interview process by explaining that interviews are audio-recorded and the interviewees are allowed to use pseudonyms. During the second stage of narrative interviews, our interviewees told their stories concerning the topic of enquiry, that is, the sense they made, or the significance they felt regarding their existence as an English language teacher in the sanctioned country of Iran. Indeed, the participants were invited to narrate their stories about the way they discovered a satisfying life purpose or what made their life meaningful within the discourse of sanctions and isolation. After this stage, we asked our interviewees to talk more about their meanings and elaborate on the

points that seemed to be unclear in their stories. That is, during the questioning process, we did not ask our interviewees to share their opinions or attitudes, but we asked for more clarifications. The fourth stage involved the conclusion and interpretation of each interview. Each narrative interview, which was conducted in a face-to-face situation, lasted one to two hours. All interviews were carried out in the English language as participants were English language teachers. Interview questions were guided by Steger's (2011) conception of the presence of meaning. Some of the interview questions are presented below:

- Regarding the present discourse of sanction, how would you interpret your position as a teacher, that is, an English language teacher?
- How would you interpret your relation with the world?
- How would you give meaning to your life as an English teacher?
- What is the central motivating aim giving your life a clear sense of purpose?

Finally, interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. After conducting narrative interviews, we conducted several interactive interviews with each individual teacher, which included the re-telling of the shared events or experiences among the participants through narrative interviews. After the transcription and analysis of interviews, we returned interview transcripts to the participants and asked them to check the accuracy of the data and re-construct their narratives by removing or revising extracts, which did not match their own narration.

To analyse interviews, we utilised Herman's (2009) framework, which addressed basic elements of a narrative: situated-ness, event sequencing, world disruption, and what it's like. Situated-ness represents the context within which the story was narrated. Here, the participants narrated their stories within the multilingual landscape of Iran, where English language teaching is considered a *lingua franca* and the language of science and technology.

Event-sequencing means unfolding the series of events as they occur in each story. Furthermore, each story may involve non-canonical events indicating the way the narrator sought to stand against the existing norms or rules in order to disrupt the given world. As Herman (2009) explained, "stories place an accent on unexpected or nuncanonical events—events that disrupt the normal order of things for human or human-like agents engaged in goal-directed activities and projects within a given world" (p. 133). As a result, at this stage, we focused on events mentioned in narratives through which the narrators tried to disrupt the normal order of things, that is, the normal and planned ways of teaching the English language as was expected before the sanctions instated in 2018. And finally, the 'what it's like' dimension of narrative analysis indicates experientiality or what it is like for participants to have this particular experience, that is, their new interpretations of their experiences based on what they presented in or discovered from the messages within the narrated stories.

It should be added that the collected stories were transcribed as is suggested by Sools (2012). She pointed out that big stories should be transcribed by removing "the interviewer's participation in the construction of meaning, and by emphasizing the flow of speech of one storyteller" (p. 98). Consequently, we, interviewers and researchers of the present study, deleted our participation in transcribing big stories to highlight the flow of speech of our interviewees. Furthermore, according to Sools, small stories must be transcribed by being close to the spoken language of the participants to show "the dialogical nature of small story" (p.98). Accordingly, we added our responses in the conversation to the transcription of small stories to stay close to the oral form of

the language. The transcripts were coded using concepts or phrases representing the core meaning of the noteworthy lines or parts. Then, the initial codes were replaced by larger or more abstract categories called themes. A hybrid thematic analysis, incorporating deductive and inductive thematic approaches to analysis, was utilised. For the purpose of deductive thematic analysis, themes were developed from priori codes extracted from the existing literature, main research questions, or the core meanings of interview questions. But, considering the inductive or data-driven approach to thematic analysis, in vivo codes extracted from the participants' own words created a list of posterior codes that we used to develop some themes.

## Findings of the Study

The analysis of stories led to the emergence of two key themes: emergence of critical hope and a shift towards plurilingual practices of agency. These two themes and their corresponding sub-themes shown in Table 2 are further described below:

Table 2  
*The Key Themes and Their Corresponding Sub-Themes*

The Key Themes	The Corresponding Sub-Themes
Emergence of Critical Hope	Experience of Injustice Creating the Possibilities of Change
A Shift towards Plurilingual Practices of Agency	Questioning Native Speaker Superiority Softening the Boundaries between Languages Fluid and Context-Based Use of Diverse Linguistic Repertoires

### *Emergence of Critical Hope*

The participating teachers mostly talked about two sub-themes: experience of injustice and creating the possibilities of change. These two sub-themes were put under the larger theme critical hope, because, as Zembylas (2014) mentioned, critical hope entails the careful analysis and understanding of the present condition as well as openness to possibilities and actions for transformation. He pointed out that being a critically hopeful person “means that the person is involved in a critical analysis of power relations and how they constitute one’s emotional ways of being in the world, while attempting to construct, imaginatively and materially, a different lifeworld” (p. 13). Referring to sanctions as an important turning point, which helped them re-analyse their position as non-native English language teachers in the dominant discourse of native-speakerism in Iran, the teacher participants stated that they started to critically analyse their new situations through the lens of justice. In their attempts to make sense of and comprehend their lives after sanctions, they experienced injustice between native and non-native English language teachers despite the prevalence of native speakerist ideology among Iranian English language teachers. In her big story, Somayeh, as one of the female teachers, talked about the experience of injustice after sanctions as follows:

*American sanctions have changed everything in Iran. For me, these sanctions mean the experience of injustice. Previously, I considered myself as one of the English teachers. Now, I think I am a non-native teacher living in a sanctioned country. So, we are different. Two different groups: those living in English speaking countries and those living in a sanctioned country. Sanctions have destroyed our lives and we have to bear the bitter sense of injustice.*



In his small story, Shahab made mention of injustice as follows:

*Shahab: Sanctions influence everything, especially the way we interpret our lives and relations.*

*Interviewer: Would you make this point clearer?*

*Shahab: I teach books written by native scholars. I taught their culture. I thought we are equal at least as English teachers.*

*Interviewer: And now?*

*Shahab: Now, we, the people of a country, not the politicians, are marginalised by these American sanctions. How can we, people of these two countries, including teachers and scholars be equal?*

*Interviewer: So, you refer to the difference between two groups of English teachers?*

*Shahab: Yes. I do! Sanctions have drastically affected our lives in Iran and resulted in the bitter sense of injustice.*

As Shahab stated, he interpreted sanctions as indicators of injustice categorizing people into various groups that are treated differently. Being influenced by sanctions, he re-defined his profession and his position within the world of English language teachers across the world. However, in her small story, Somayeh explained that even after the experience of anger resulted from injustice caused by sanctions imposed on Iran, she followed her ideals and goals. She asserted that she tried to create chances for change, even small changes in her classrooms, learners, and society.

*Somayeh: Experiencing negative feelings such as anger or sense of injustice is not the end. I am still a teacher.*

*Interviewer: Would you elaborate on that, please?*

*Somayeh: I will not give up and will follow my ideals.*

*Interviewer: You mean you will go on even after sanctions and the experience of injustice?*

*Somayeh: Yes.*

*Interviewer: How?*

*Somayeh: Trying to create an opportunity for change, I believe we have to change even in the worst situations. I create changes in my learners and community where I live.*

Similar to Somayeh, Maryam, as a female English teacher explained in her big story:

*Sanctions changed our lives and the way we made sense of our lives. But it doesn't mean that we do not pursue our great goals. No, as an Iranian and even non-native English teacher, I intend to pursue my goals. In class discussions, we talk about the problems and try to share our ideas to find solutions and change the current situation.*

As the above-mentioned examples extracted from big and small stories show, the participating teachers largely talked about the experience of injustice while elaborating on the way they comprehended their lives after the U. S. sanctions. However, illuminating the goals and ideals for which they lived, they spoke of the creation of possibilities to negotiate and change injustice. As the people of a developing country and non-native English language teachers, they experienced a

sense of injustice with respect to the U.S. Unilateral economic sanctions on Iran. But, they believed in transformative power of hope.

### *A Shift towards Plurilingual Practices of Agency*

The second theme was named a shift towards plurilingual practices of agency, which was composed of three sub-themes: questioning native speaker superiority, softening the boundaries between languages, and fluid and context-based use of diverse linguistic repertoires. Moore and Gajo (2009) defined a plurilingual language user as “a social actor who develops a repertoire made up of various languages and varieties of languages, and different forms of knowledge. These resources constitute linguistic and cultural capital, and multiple forms of investment” (p. 142). In their comments about the way they comprehended their lives after U. S. sanctions, the majority of participants questioned the superiority of native speakers, even some of the teachers who largely used authentic materials prepared by native speakers. In her big story, Maryam, as a female teacher indicated:

*We are talking about sanctions that dramatically influenced Iranian people's lives. Living in such a situation made me think more deeply about my own position. Now, I realise what my colleagues said before sanctions about the authority and primacy, which are inherently, and yet unfairly, assigned to native speakers.*

Similarly, in his small story, Mohsen explained:

*Mohsen: Many things should be questioned.*

*Interviewer: For example?*

*Mohsen: Who has the right to impose sanctions? And why?*

*Interviewer: Hmm.*

*Mohsen: And in EFL, who has the right to evaluate EFL teachers?*

*Interviewer: Please go on.*

*Mohsen: Why should we accept dominance of native speakers in our career? We are sanctioned as Iranian people. We are also marginalised as non-native teachers. Why?*

Illuminating the purpose of their lives, the participants explained that, to challenge the superiority of native speakers, they think of and aim at softening the boundary between their mother tongue and the English language through the context-based use of one set of skills or knowledge from their linguistic repertoire. In his big story, Mohsen contended:

*You know, I came to a new point. Both Persian and English languages should be flexibly used in my class as they represent speakers of a particular context with particular culture and identity, not just these two languages, even other languages, if our learners are Turk, Arab, Lor, Kurd, Baluch, and so on. We should know when to use them based on the needs of communications.*

Likewise, Ehsan, another male teacher hinted at the flexible and context based use of various languages, including learners' local and national languages in an EFL class. In his big story, he pointed out:

*I feel injustice. I think I am marginalised. But that doesn't mean that I give up. After working many years as an English teacher, who rigorously focused on standards and rules, I want to challenge standards determined by native speakers. To start, I want to switch codes and use my mother tongue in the class based on the needs of the class.*

As examples indicate, sanctions made the participants think about the existing boundaries not only in the world but also in their profession. After sanctions, their perception of being an English teacher was changed and they mainly defined themselves as non-native English language teachers while they taught in the context where the majority of language teachers were non-native English teachers. But such a change did not result in anger or a sense of distance. On the contrary, they sought to dynamically use various codes of communication, leading to a chance for dialogue.

## Discussion

The first theme identified in the present study was named critical hope. While MacIntyre et al. (2019) explained that chronic stressors increase teachers' susceptibility to burnout, in the present study, American sanctions as examples of chronic stressors, made teachers critically evaluate their position towards the dominant discourse of native speakers as well as the Western world in order to create a possibility for change and hope. Hope was a factor in constructing the participants' meaning in life or in a broader term well-being. This finding was in line with the results of the study carried out by Li (2018), indicating that psychological capital like hope helps teachers to appraise their life events in a positive way and MIL resulted from positive appraisal of life events yields university teachers' well-being. This finding was also in agreement with the result of the study conducted by Chamani et al. (2023), underscoring the importance of activities at work for positively engaging teachers in decision-making processes to give them a sense of significance and enhance their well-being. In the present study, the participants also spoke of hope in their pursuit of the purpose of life. But, in their critical examination of the present condition, they talked about injustice. That is, while they referred to injustice in their comprehension of life after sanctions, they believed in the possibilities of changes when they referred to their purpose of life. Therefore, we used the term critical hope to convey their meaning. According to Zembylas (2014), "It is important, therefore, to distinguish naïve hope – which is similar to optimism or a blind faith that things will get better – from critical hope, which is grounded in reflexivity and action for transformation" (p. 13). Ainley and Canaan (2006) acknowledged that critical hope transcends the teacher-student relationships and is an alternative to the existing world order threatening justice and equality. That is, as was suggested in the study by Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022), EFL teachers' well-being, composed of meaning in life, is a quality of relations. Zembylas (2022) pointed out that critical hope questions social injustice for the purpose of social transformation. Addressing the role of critical hope in educational systems, he maintains that hope built on critical reflection aims at challenging colonial projects.

One of the colonial projects in English language education is the discourse of native-speakerism, revolving around the superiority of native speakers (Tupas, 2022). Tupas indicated that colonial discourses such as native-speakerism do not "accrue to unhinged cultural beliefs about language and identity. They are rooted in the enduring structures of colonialism such that these beliefs are affirmed and sustained in social institutions, foremost of which is education" (p. 156). According to da Silva et al. (2022), critical hope in language classes offers a possibility to de-construct Eurocentric ideals hidden in scientific production since the concept of the Other, including non-native English speaking teachers, is re-visited and the existing knowledge produced through the mainstream trends is re-constructed to hear the voice of the marginalised and silenced groups and provide a space to re-cover the stigma resulted from injustice. According to Zembylas (2014), critical hope leads to a new social stance through which individuals recognise the existing injustice

and inequality, and re-frame their perceptions of otherness as diversities rather than discriminating differences.

In a nutshell, critical hope involves emotional resistance to the existing injustice and discrimination in both educational systems and social contexts, which is defined as critical emotional praxis (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2009). Zembylas (2012) explained that “critical emotional praxis, therefore, offers opportunities to produce transformative action, because teachers and students can translate their critical emotional understandings into new ways of living with others” (p. 22). Our participating teachers re-analysed their real situation after sanctions. This made them think about their positionality towards native speaker ideology and the concept of otherness. Talking about their responses to the existing injustice experienced after sanctions, they made mention of becoming a plurilingual English teacher.

As was explained above, the second theme was named a shift towards plurilingual practices of agency. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2013), a plurilingual practice represents a single complex competence, involving various languages, such as minority, national, and English language, as the speaker’s linguistic resource, through which the legitimacy and dominance of a native speaker as the ideal model of the language and teaching process is challenged. Piccardo (2013) pointed out that plurilingual practices in language classes revolve around the agency of language users in using one set of skills and knowledge from their linguistic repertoire based on the contextual needs. In her explication of the meaning of plurilingualism as a new trend to be followed in ELT, she states that “whereas multilingualism focuses on quantity—on considering a series of languages without any particular attention paid to relations between them—plurilingualism insists on the relationships amongst all languages of each individual” (p. 604).

Similarly, Piccardo (2019) asserted that plurilingual language users are social agents in dynamic interactions with the contexts of communications through the space of respect for and openness to the non-dominant languages, cultures, experiences, and human knowledge. Indeed, plurilingual language users pay attention to the need of communications and interlocutors, and use codes of communication in a dynamic way. This finding was in correspondence with the finding of the study carried out by Ismail et al. (2023), indicating that EFL teachers’ well-being is shaped through interpersonal dynamics. Furthermore, in line with Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022), the participants perceived meaning in life, as a component of their well-being, through relations. MacIntyre et al. (2019) suggested that teachers’ openness to embrace alternative experiences, cultures, and languages is significantly correlated with various components of well-being, including MIL, because it helps teachers pursue their ideals. Likewise, in the present study, openness was highlighted in the second theme centering on plurilingual practices and the relationship between EFL teachers’ openness and MIL was underscored. However, openness in our study was viewed as a liberating and empowering trait that EFL teachers spoke of in their explanation of the purpose of life, because, as MacIntyre et al. argued, “the open, dynamic, and multiple lens that plurilingualism offers can represent an embracing, liberating perspective that fosters individuals’ agency” (p. 188). As Moore and Gajo (2009) acknowledged, plurilingualism is about the alternative choices each speaker makes from among her multiple identities and language modes within a single conversation so that it draws attention to “the speaker’s voice and to possibilities of empowerment and resistance through differentiated language use” (p. 141).

Conceptualising plurilingual practices in ELT as chances for a new understanding of language teaching procedure and resistance to the dominant discourse of native-speaker standards, Flores (2013) asserted that, through plurilingual practices, language teachers become agents because they experience a shift in their identities from a user of pre-determined rules to a user of fluid language practices. Wernicke (2018) believed that, having access to alternative and fluid language practices helps language teachers question the constraining power relations produced by a native-speaker ideology and enables them to negotiate “a different kind of teachers identity that gets

accomplished by drawing on a different set of affordances” (p. 9). That is, U. S. sanctions were turning points that made the teacher participants with various beliefs about the language teaching process re-think and re-evaluate the relationship between a sanctioning country and a sanctioned country. This also made them re-examine the relationship between native and non-native English teachers, especially in a discourse dominated by the native speaker superiority.

## **Conclusion**

The present study sought to examine Iranian EFL teachers’ MIL, as a component of their well-being, after U.S. sanctions. The participants were asked to narrate their stories regarding the way they comprehended their life after sanctions and the way they strove for their valuable purposes. Two main themes were identified: the emergence of critical hope and a shift towards plurilingual practices of agency. Teachers’ critical hope guided them to plurilingual practices of agency whereby their linguistic identities could be valued as a pedagogical resource of inclusion. That is, the participating teachers’ meaning in life, as a component of their well-being, was shaped through their plurilingual practices. Acknowledging plurilingual practices in language classes creates a space to go beyond the traditional approaches to language teaching. Such a call for plurilingual perception of language education can be highly useful for language learners, because, as Zeaier (2023) pointed out, plurilingual practices and tasks such as translation, translanguaging, pluri-literacies, and cross-linguistic comparison, enhance language learners’ emotional well-being since such tasks and practices “highlight the unavoidable hybrid and fluid interconnectedness of individuals as social agents with external social and cultural influences and other social agents” (p. 281). While the findings of the present study were limited to Iranian EFL teachers working at higher education systems, further studies on language teachers in other educational contexts or even other socio-political contexts threatened by sanctions can be helpful. Also, scholars are suggested to study Iranian language learners and explore the way their well-being is affected by various socio-political events. Furthermore, conducting mixed-methods studies, to probe into a larger sample of participants, broadens our understanding of the main themes of the present study, revolving around critical hope and plurilingual practices of agency. Critical hope is regarded as a social justice turn, which can be highly insightful in the context of English language education, where social justice-oriented topics are taboo topics and overreliance on neutral topics, as a dominant approach to ELT, led to the apolitical and ahistorical process of teaching. The inclusion of plurilingual practices in language classes opens a new space for acknowledging the third space of hybridity and in-betweenness, which help EFL teachers and researchers to challenge large-culture blocks.

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