# Exploring the Factors Triggering Iranian EFL Teachers' Immunity: A Mixed-Method Inquiry

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## Abstract

It is frequently affirmed that EFL teachers face many stressors at work. While they keep experiencing perturbations that may cause fluctuations in their efficacy, immunity acts as a buffer and allows teachers to carry on performing academically in the classroom and emotionally and psychologically over the course of their careers (Thelen, 2005). The present study adapted a mixed-method design to investigate the distribution of the participants across different immunity types and also the destabilizing events which triggers Iranian EFL teachers' immunity. To fulfill this aim, 204 English teachers from two provinces of Iran (Isfahan and Charmahal Bakhtiari) took part in the study. To collect the data, Language Teacher Immunity Questionnaire (Hiver, 2016), reflective journal, and interview were utilized. The data gathered via questionnaire were subjected to descriptive analysis and cluster analysis while the qualitative data were analyzed through the three-stage coding process of grounded theory. The results of the qualitative analysis led to the identification of three immunity types, namely, productively immunized, maladaptively immunized, and immunocompromised with maladaptively immunized teachers having the highest rate of distribution among the participants. The results of the study further identified 3 categories of educational, organizational, and personal triggers along with 14 subcategories among Iranian EFL teachers. The findings of the study can have implications for teachers, stakeholders, and policy-makers to help teachers foster their immunity against stressors and avoid fatigue and burnout.

## Introduction

English teaching is a complicated and delicate task that needs the teacher to have a good command of English and know the details of classroom management the techniques and strategies for teaching language skills. This profession, however, is not without challenges and teachers need to face difficulties both inside and outside the classroom. As Hiver (2016) mentions, the concept of language teacher immunity (LTI) plays an important role in L2 teachers' professional identity and affects how L2 practitioners position themselves in the profession through their associated attitudes. Moreover, the consequences of LTI are represented in the real-life classroom options of L2 practitioners, indicating that language teachers' emotions, teaching motivation, and instructional effectiveness may depend on the results of LTI (Hiver, 2016). In his initial exploratory study, Hiver (2015) approves that language teachers gradually improve an evolving outcome, through the fluctuations they encounter in the classroom environment, which functions as a defense mechanism against the material and emotional pressures as parts of their practice. He refers to this outcome as "language teacher immunity".

The idea of teachers' immunity was developed based on human's biological immunity functioning which protects the organism against harmful and undesirable substances from the environment and defends the system in which it is located. However, biological immunity system also includes a snapshot of those hyperactive immune reactions, which results in counterproductive manifestations of human immunity such as autoimmunity and allergy (Rose & Mackay, 2014). In the same way, Teacher immunity states that the protection outcome is always evolved out of a preliminary defensive response to disorders and disturbances. Similar to its biological counterpart, however, teacher immunity can initiate maladaptive responses and mistakenly jeopardize L2 teachers' functioning by manifesting itself in abnormal and aberrant ways (Hiver & Dornyei, 2017). This immunity appears in different aspects with the possibility to be either positive or negative and has the potential to affect almost everything that teachers do in their professions.

Thus, there should be a pressing concern to investigate different aspects of teacher immunity among Iranian EFL teachers in order to help them persist and endure within the profession for a long period of time. More specifically, identifying the factors that trigger immunity among EFL teachers can be very helpful in developing a productive type of immunity against emotional disturbances, motivational obstacles, and threats to the personality and avoiding fatigue and burnout among EFL teachers.

## Literature Review

### Empirical Studies

Hiver and Dornyei (2017) introduced the theoretical framework of teacher immunity. They defined teacher immunity as a defense mechanism against the material and emotional demands placed on L2 practitioners. Later, Hiver (2016) found seven components of teachers' immunity: teaching self-efficacy, resilience,

coping, burnout, attitudes toward teaching, openness to change, and classroom affectivity.

The introduction of teacher immunity by Hiver and Dornyei (2017) has opened new ways of inquiry in EFL teachers' psychology. So far, researchers have investigated different aspects of teacher immunity. For example, Saydam (2019) investigated how language teacher immunity develops and functions as well as the distribution of immunity types to reveal the motivational implications and consequences of this new construct in Turkish context. The findings revealed that the main teacher immunity types are productively immunized. Furthermore, the effect of the demographic characteristics on teachers' immunity levels was explored and it was seen that demographic characteristics do not have a major impact on immunity levels. Finally, the study indicated that productively immunized and maladaptively immunized teachers follow different paths of development through the self-organization process.

Furthermore, in recent years, teacher immunity has attracted EFL researchers' attention in Iran. For instance, Maghsoudi (2021) explored the immunity levels of EFL student-teachers at teacher education universities in Iran using a mixed-method design. The results led to the identification of three immunity types, namely, negative (maladaptive), neutral, and positive (productive) types and further indicated that productive immunity type was dominant among the student teachers. In addition, the results of the study also revealed that, unlike gender, the factor of years of education was a significant factor in terms of determining the immunity levels of the student teachers.

In a recent study, Songhori, Ghonsooly, and Afraz (2018) tried to find out what type of language teacher immunity was dominant among Iranian English teachers and how these teachers might have developed their immunity type through a mixed-method approach. The findings of the study revealed that maladaptive immunity was a dominant type of immunity among Iranian English teachers. According to them, Iranian English teachers followed the four stages of self-organization, namely, triggering, coupling, realignment, and stabilization in forming their immunity.

Considering the above-mentioned examples, it seems that most of the studies on teachers' immunity have focused on the developmental path of teachers' immunity or the relationship between immunity and other individual variables such as motivation or demographic characteristics (e.g., Ahmadi, Amiryousefi, & Hesabi, 2020; Ordem, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, quite a few studies (e.g., Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2020) have concisely mentioned triggering factors of teachers' immunity. A gap then is felt in teacher education to study triggering factors among different immunity types of EFL teachers.

**Theoretical Framework**

Hiver (2016) has stated that teacher immunity manifests itself in four emergent categories: L2 teachers may be (a) productively immunized (i.e., possessing a robust, beneficial form of teacher immunity), (b) maladaptively immunized (i.e.,

possessing a rigid, counterproductive form of teacher immunity), (c) immunocompromised (i.e., has not developed any coherent form of teacher immunity), or (d) partially immunized (i.e., having developed half-way features of teacher immunity).

Moreover, Hiver and Dornyei (2017) claimed that teachers follow a self-organized sequence of four stages as a developmental process toward immunity as follows:

1. Triggering: a perturbation causes a system disturbance. Because disturbances are essential to destabilize a dynamic system, the process of self-organization can only proceed if there is a trigger such as perturbation (Kiel & Elliot, 1996, p. 53).

2. Linking: the reformulation of the system's components to cope with the disturbances. Positive feedback reinforces the local perturbations until they impact the entire system while negative feedback reins in unsustainable or run-away growth (O'Sullivan, 2009, p. 241).

3. Realignment:  the system's returning to equilibrium through the symbiotic relationship developed between the disturbances and explicit response options (Hiver, 2017). This return to stability takes place in the realignment stage through the emergence of new higher-order patterns (Kiel & Elliot, 1996, p. 68)

4. Stabilization: the transformation of the system into a new meta-component that buffers the system from future disturbances (Hiver, 2015, p. 217).

Additionally, Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) believe that LTI emerges from the experience that a language teacher has gained from coping with stresses, problems, and difficulties that they have faced while they move through the developmental path of four stages. They add that these experiences allow language teachers to cope with the daily problems they have during their classroom teaching. However, there are few indications on the factors that trigger EFL teachers' immunity. Knowledge of these factors that exert an impact on LTI will certainly help create an environment in which teachers engage in teaching practices with fewer problems and consequently move toward a productive form of immunity. Given the significance of the issue of LTI, the current study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the distribution of Iranian EFL teachers across the main teacher immunity types?

RQ2: What are the factors triggering LTI among Iranian EFL teachers?

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants of the study were a total of 204 EFL teachers (102 women and 97 men) working in English schools in Isfahan and Chaharmahal Bakhtiari provinces. They were selected through convenience sampling method due to their accessibility and proximity to the researcher. Their age ranged from 25 to 48 with different years of experience from 3 to 25. They had BA (69.1 %), MA (26.9 %), or PhD degrees

(3.9 %) in either English translation or teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). They had the experience of teaching English in secondary school (n = 79), or high school (n = 103), or both (n = 22). Their first language was Persian, and none of them had studied English abroad. While being selected, the participants were provided with the necessary information about the aim and design of the study.

Finally, 15 of the participants (5 participants from each immunity types) were selected through Maximal Variation Sampling to take part in the qualitative phase (Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants). Maximal variation sampling is a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait (Creswell, 2012). Immunity types of the participants were identified by questionnaire cluster analysis (see the results).

**Table 1**

*Demographic Features of Participating Teachers*

| Participants | Sex | Years of Experience | Educational Background | Immunity Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | M | > 5 | BA | PIT[a] |
| B | M | 5-10 | MA | PIT |
| C | F | 11-15 | PhD | PIT |
| D | F | 16-20 | BA | PIT |
| E | F | < 20 | MA | PIT |
| F | M | > 5 | BA | MIT[b] |
| G | M | 5-10 | MA | MIT |
| H | M | 11-15 | MA | MIT |
| I | F | 16-20 | BA | MIT |
| J | F | < 20 | BA | MIT |
| K | M | > 5 | BA | ICT[c] |
| L | M | 5-10 | BA | ICT |
| M | F | 11-15 | MA | ICT |
| N | F | 16-20 | BA | ICT |
| O | F | < 20 | BA | ICT |

[a] PIT stands for productively immunized teacher type
[b] MIT stands for maladaptively immunized teacher type
[c] ICT stands for immunocompromised teacher type

## Instruments

For the present study, several instruments were used which are as follows:

### Language Teacher Immunity Questionnaire

The Language Teacher Immunity Questionnaire (Appendix A), developed by Hiver (2016), consisted of 39 items across 7 subscales, each with a 6-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The questionnaire was reported to have high reliability and validity (Hiver, 2017). In this study, the reliability of the test was found to be relatively high (Cronbach's α = .894). Factor analyses also provided support for the construct validity of the questionnaire. In this sample, confirmatory factor analysis provided evidence for the seven factors underlying language Teachers Immunity Questionnaire, that are Teaching Self-Efficacy, Burnout, Resilience, Attitudes Toward Teaching, Openness to Change, Classroom Affectivity, and Coping.

### Reflective Journals

The participants were asked to keep reflective journals in English or Persian during the academic year 2018-2019. A reflective journal can be used to document the participants' ideas, personal thoughts, and experiences, as well as reflections and insights. According to Daloglu (2001), reflective journals connect the teachers' prior knowledge to the new knowledge and help them to know their weaknesses and strengths. The framework of the journals in the current study was adopted from Jasper (2013). Jaspers' (2013) stages are experience, reflection, and action. Firstly, the participants were asked to describe their experiences of stressors and disturbances. In the reflection stage, they thought through the experiences and recorded their feelings and thoughts. In the final stage, they recorded their reactions to these destabilizing events. The length of the journals varied between one to two pages.

### Semi-Structured Interview

The interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical framework of the study. It elicited the language teachers' viewpoints regarding the main factors influencing language teachers' immunity. It was developed based on five verbs *think, believe, feel, do, and want*, taken from Hiver (2017).

To check the adequacy of the interview protocol, a pilot study was done. The adequacy of the initial questions was discussed with 5 English language educators who had PhD in TEFL and the questions were modified when needed. The interview protocol was then used to interview 2 EFL teachers who were similar to the participants of the study. The appropriateness of the questions was examined and some of the questions were revised.

## Procedure

The present study was conducted in language classrooms of public schools in Isfahan and Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari province. The data collection process was

performed in several stages. After attending the schools and obtaining the necessary permissions, the researchers sent the LTI questionnaires to the language teachers via E-mail. The teachers were asked to answer the questions and return the questionnaires to the researcher. From the 217 questionnaires distributed, 13 of them were not completely or properly answered and were discarded from the final analysis.

In the qualitative phase, at first, the concept of teacher immunity, its stages, and components were explained to the participants. In addition, the purposes and objectives of the study (factors relevant to teacher immunity and coping strategies) were discussed in detail. Secondly, they were asked to write their reflective journals based on Jaspers' (2013) framework especially concentrating on the problems they faced in the school.

In the next stage, the participants were interviewed to confirm the results and gain further understanding of the trigger factors leading to teacher immunity. The interview sessions were held in the classrooms or a place convenient to the participants. The teachers could choose the language of their interviews between English or Persian. The interviews were done in a semi-structured way. The whole sessions were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim for further analysis. Each interview took about 50 minutes.

**Data Analysis**

The mixed-methods design was used to strengthen the validity of the results (Creswell, 2005). In this design, qualitative and quantitative data on an issue were collected and analyzed separately; then, the results were converged during interpretation. The questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively by using SPSS 22. The data were subjected to cluster analysis to assign the participants to their immunity classifications (types). Furthermore, to analyze the data elicited from interviews and journals, principles of grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were used. The analysis included three stages starting from open coding, moving to axial coding, and finally to selective coding. In the process of open coding, the interview transcripts and reflective journals were read several times by the researcher, looking for recurring patterns. In the axial coding, the parts related to the same topic were merged into one category. In selective coding, sub-categories were united to form core categories. The core categories were later subjected to frequency analysis.

**Results**

**Results of the LTI Questionnaire: Addressing Research Question One**

In this section, the quantitative data gathered from LTI questionnaire were analyzed to classify the participants into their immunity type. The results were also used to find out the distribution of different immunity types among the participants

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of seven subscales of LTI questionnaire.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Analysis of LTI Questionnaire*

| Questionnaire Scales | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching Self-Efficacy | 4.7929 | .71859 | .516 | .007 | -.907 |
| Burnout | 3.4367 | .92681 | .859 | .039 | -.653 |
| Resilience | 3.9333 | .90435 | .818 | -.036 | -.831 |
| Attitude Towards Teaching | 4.8867 | .75945 | .577 | -.807 | .340 |
| Openness to Change | 4.3250 | .70965 | .504 | -.579 | -.235 |
| Classroom Affectivity | 4.6778 | .70033 | .490 | -.081 | -.266 |
| Coping | 3.5033 | .94993 | .902 | -.241 | -.384 |

Taking a quick look at Table 2 reveals that skewness and kurtosis values for all the seven subparts are between -1.5 to +1.5, which indicates normality of variance (Bachman & Kunnan, 2005). As for measures of central tendency, the mean value in the distribution was found to be above 4.00 for all the items of the scales, as shown in the following radar chart. The highest mean is for the "teaching self-efficacy" and the lowest is for the "burnout".

**Figure 1**

*Radar Chart Comparison of Mean Variables*
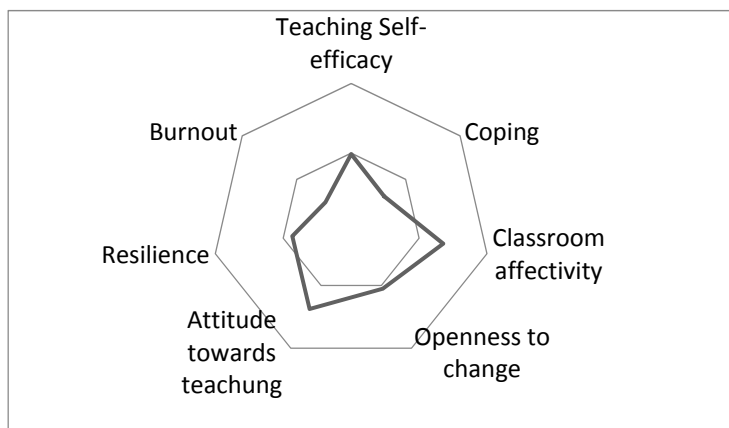
Furthermore, a two-step cluster analysis was run to classify the participants into different immunity types and specify the most dominant type among Iranian EFL teachers. To choose criterion variables, firstly, a cluster analysis was run with all the variables. Burnout and coping were selected as criterion variables for clustering analysis. Schwarz's Bayesian Information Criterion and the log-likelihood distance proximity measure were used to determine the number of clusters. The analysis resulted in 3 clusters. The mean values of the five clusters are presented in Table 3. The validity of this final five-cluster solution was checked by conducting the univariate main effects (Table 3).

The univariate main effects for cluster membership were also calculated for criterion variables the results of which appear in Table 4. Additionally, to evaluate the predictive importance of criterion variables on cluster membership, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted, the results of which indicated a good fit (-2 log-likelihood = 98.033, $\chi^2 = 261.6$, $df = 51$, $p = 001$). Based on the validation measures, a final five-cluster solution was a strong way to categorize the participants.

**Table 3**

*Profiles of Validated Clusters*

|  | Cluster 1 N = 71 | Cluster 2 N = 48 | Cluster 3 N = 85 | F-Value | $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching Self-Efficacy | 5.65 | 2.36 | 2.77 | 215.8 | .61 |
| Resilience | 4.91 | 3.53 | 1.83 | 133.1 | .64 |
| Openness | 5. 12 | 4.15 | 2.61 | 158.3 | .80 |
| Classroom Affectivity | 4. 47 | 3.34 | 2.74 | 179.2 | .56 |
| Attitudes to Teaching | 5.79 | 2.94 | 2.26 | 98.5 | .69 |

**Table 4**

*Criterion Variable Profiles for Validated Clusters*

|  | Cluster 1 | Cluster 2 | Cluster 3 | F-value | $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burn out | 2.43 | 3.41 | 4.93 | 178.1 | .88 |
| Coping | 4.57 | 4.12 | 1.71 | 225.9 | .72 |

The composition of clusters based on gender, degree, and age of experience appears in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Composition of the Clusters*

|  | Cluster 1 | Cluster 2 | Cluster 3 | Sum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | n | n | n | N |
| Gender |  |  |  |  |
| Male | 27 | 28 | 55 | 110 |
| Female | 44 | 20 | 30 | 94 |
| Degree |  |  |  |  |
| BA | 24 | 24 | 78 | 126 |
| MA | 42 | 22 | 6 | 70 |
| PhD | 5 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| Age of Experience |  |  |  |  |
| < 1 Year | 5 | 3 | 6 | 14 |
| 1-3 Years | 9 | 3 | 7 | 19 |
| 4-6 Years | 15 | 2 | 9 | 26 |
| 7-10 Years | 24 | 6 | 10 | 40 |
| 11-15 Years | 8 | 22 | 17 | 47 |
| 16-20 Years | 9 | 8 | 20 | 37 |
| 20-25 Years | 1 | 4 | 16 | 21 |

Drawing on Hivers' (2015, 2017) classification of immunity types, it can be said that the teachers in cluster 1 developed a positive immunity (distribution = 31.8 %). Their self-efficacy, resilience, and openness to change are considerably high. They had a very optimistic view of their career and showed positive effects in their classroom. They also showed low levels of burnout and were willing to use novel and appropriate coping strategies while confronting the problems. Table 5 represents that they were mostly female teachers who had a degree higher than BA and years of experience between 7 to 10 years.

Contrary to cluster 1, cluster 3 (distribution = 41.6%) represented a group of maladaptively immunized teachers. They indicated medium to low levels of efficacy and resilience. They developed a negative attitude toward their career and low classroom affectivity. They were unenthusiastic to change as their levels of openness and coping were trivial. The teachers in this group suffered moderate to high degrees of burnout. This cluster was mainly formed by the experienced teachers (more than 15 years of experience). They were mostly men holding a BA degree.

Clusters 2 can be called immunocompromised teachers (distribution = 23.5%), based on the classification of immunity type introduced by Hiver (2017) because they did not develop any special types of immunity. Their burnout level and coping were moderate to high and they indicated an average level of efficacy. This cluster, however, could be distinguished by exhibiting significant levels of openness to change and resilience. On the other hand, they were typified taking a very pessimistic attitude toward their careers. Their effectiveness level was very low. They were mostly male teachers who had BA or MA degree and whose experience was mostly between 7 to 20 years.

For practical reasons, we preferred to form 3 basic types. The majority of participating teachers were not positively immunized and they faced obstacles in their way to be positively immunized. This fact urged us to investigate the factors triggering teacher immunity. These problems will be discussed in the next part.

**Qualitative Phase: Addressing Research Question Two**

Hiver (2017) introduced four stages for teachers' immunity: triggering, linking, realignment, and stabilization. In the present study, our focus is on stage one that was related to our research question (triggering factors).

The triggering stage is the stage in which teachers experience triggering events (or destabilizing events) that provide the initial impetus for systems to self-organize along their respective trajectories to teacher immunity archetypes (Hiver, 2017). To find triggering factors, 5 participants were selected from each immunity types (productively immunized, maladaptively immunized, immunocompromised). They were subjected to both interview and journal writing. The analysis of the results boiled down to 3 categories and 14 subcategories of the destabilizing triggers. Table 6 shows the analysis of destabilizing triggers.

**Table 6**

*Results of the Analysis of Triggering Events*

| Categories | Sub-Categories | Frequencies | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | PIT | MIT | IMT |
| Educational | Textbook issues | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| | Students' issues | 3 | 7 | 4 |
| | Issues in teaching methods | 4 | 6 | 7 |
| | Assessment issues | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| | Curriculum issues | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| | | 9 | 21 | 16 |
| Organizational | Inadequate payment and reward | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| | Lack of equipment and facilities | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| | Teachers' lack of autonomy | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| | Inadequate teacher training | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| | Lack of social support | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| | | 13 | 17 | 14 |
| Personal | Demographic characteristics | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| | Teachers' negative attitudes toward their job | 0 | 5 | 4 |
| | Teachers' lack of knowledge | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| | Negative personality traits | 1 | 3 | 5 |

### Educational Triggering Events

Educational upheavals were among the most frequent destabilizing events that almost all the teachers pointed to and all three types of teachers were excessively impressed by them. Maladaptively immunized teachers, however, mentioned

educational triggers more than the other two immunity types.  Five sub-categories were diagnosed for this category: textbook issues, student issues, issues in teaching methods, assessment issues, and curriculum issues.

Most of the comments concerning educational triggers are related to textbooks. Teacher H, a maladaptively immunized one, complained about them as follows:

*The books are very boring in terms of appearance and pictures. The focus of the books is on grammatical points and reading skills. Oral skills are limited to the conversations at the beginning of the lessons, which also seem very unauthentic. The exercises bother me because I spend a lot of time working on them and students are not able to do them if they are even a bit changed. They are completely form-focused. Teaching these books makes me feel drained of energy.*

The second sub-category that appeared after marking the pieces of data was student issues. Comments about students' inappropriate behaviors were common in the data.

*The new generation is very hard to understand. My students are constantly nagging about everything. They are disappointed and spreading their disappointment around the class including me. When I have them do a task, they seem bored and demotivated. They always make excuses for not doing homework. They don't take any responsibility for their learning and it puts too much burden on my shoulders.*

Some other teachers thought the students' problems frustrated them. As an example, teacher L, as an immunocompromised teacher, perceived this factor as a disruption:

*This year I work in a school in a suburban area.  The population mostly faces social and financial problems. The students are mostly from less-fortunate families. Some of their parents are divorced or in jail. Being a teacher to these students is very demanding. They are demotivated and inattentive. I can't console them or help them solve their problems and it hurts me.*

Moreover, some of the interviewees were concerned with the heterogeneity of their students' English proficiency*:*

*Some of the students have their first encounter with English in school, although some have been attending private institutes for a long time. It is very exhausting for me to teach English to such students with varying levels of oral and written proficiency. English classes are always heterogeneous in terms of students' previous proficiency.*

The third sub-category of educational triggers related to teaching methods. Many teachers complained that they were often forced to use out-of-date or impractical teaching methods and techniques. A, a productively immunized teacher commented on this issue:

*The content of the textbooks and final exams forced me to focus mostly on grammatical points and reading skills. Therefore, unfortunately, I have to stick to*

*some old-fashioned methods like audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods. Furthermore, in the context of high school, students get used to teacher-centered classes. I am the one who always speaks and students just listen and do nothing. I feel so bored of using these tedious methods but I have no other choices.*

Assessment issues formed the next sub-category. Some teachers considered washback effects of final exams and university entrance exams as a factor that negatively affects the quality of their teaching and, as a result, wears them out. Teacher D clarified this issue:

*Students' grades are very important to my superiors. I am repeatedly told to help students pass the final exams. No matter what the qualities of teaching and learning are, the teachers' efficacy is just judged by students' final results and passing rate.*

Teacher M, a 12th-grade teacher (the final grade at High School), more specifically referred to washback effects of university entrance exams (Konkor):

*Success in Konkor is on top of everything at high school. As a 12th grade teacher, I have to allocate too much time on Konkor tests besides teaching textbooks, which puts too much pressure on me. The efficacy of your teaching is determined by the rate of students' admission in Konkor. Their parents and my superiors expect me to do a miracle and turn the students into proficient language learners in a year, no matter what their beginning English levels are!*

Curriculum issues were recognized as the last sub-category that the participants perceived. G, a maladaptively immunized teacher, complained about the time allocated to grade one high school:

*I have been teaching English in grade one for 5 years. I think the time allocated to cover the book is very limited because the book has four lessons with a lot of new subjects. I also have to devote a great deal of time to check their homework and work on final exam sample tests during the semester. I have to work harder and harder to make up for the time shortage.*

### Organizational Triggering Events

The second frequent category was organizational destabilizing events which were sorted into five subcategories: inadequate payment and reward, lack of equipment and facilities, teachers' lack of autonomy, inadequate teacher training, and lack of social support. Almost all three types of teachers, especially the maladaptively immunized ones, pointed to organizational triggers.

A lot of interviewees, mostly the ones with male teachers, concentrated on teachers' payment and rewarding system. Therefore, it was considered as the first sub-category. One of the teachers said:

*I feel demotivated at work because my salary is very low and I am always engaged with financial problems. I cannot act as a fresh teacher as long as I have a light wallet! I cannot do my job efficiently because I feel I am not paid fairly. What is discouraging is that you are not gratified or rewarded for being a better teacher or for your job accomplishments.*

Another theme that was recurrently mentioned by the participants was the lack of equipment and facilities. Especially the teachers who work in rural and suburban areas found this issue very frustrating:

*I have been working in a small village for three years. The school building is very old and unsafe. The classes are overcrowded and do not have the necessary air conditioning. In winter, they lack appropriate and safe heating devices. There is no language laboratory or even audio equipment in the school. Teaching at this school for three years made me feel used up. I am not a joyful teacher as I used to be.*

The third sub-category of organizational triggers was the teachers' lack of autonomy. E, a maladaptively immunized teacher, explained the issue as:

*I am not a decision-maker in my class. Everything is already determined by the superiors and administrators. They decide about the material, method, location, my school, grades, and everything. They force me to do whatever they want and threaten me if I object to them. I cannot be an effective teacher because I am not a decision-maker.*

English teachers usually become acquainted with theories of teaching methodology at universities. The students, however, receive only two to three credits EFL methodology, which is insufficient for long-term results (Sadeghi & Khezrlou, 2016). Their knowledge about teaching methodology is not updated by any effective in-service program. Teacher A highlighted this issue:

*When I was a B.A. student, I completed some courses about teaching methodology. But these courses did not make me qualified for practical teaching. Now after ten years of teaching, I feel even more incompetent and out-of-date. There are some meetings and contests which are held by the English Educational Department of the Ministry of Education from time to time, yet they are neither enough nor helpful to me. I think there should be some systematic in-service teacher training programs to freshen the teachers and update their knowledge.*

The last subcategory of organizational triggers was a lack of social support. N, an immunocompromised teacher, considered unfriendly and negative behavior of superiors and colleagues as a factor resulting in exhaustion and frustration.

*This year, I feel intimidated and uncomfortable in the school because the schoolmaster's behavior is so bossy and aggressive. She is always yelling at the personnel. She is biased and doesn't put everybody on the same page. Her behavior makes me emotionally exhausted and sensitive.*

### Personal Triggering Events

According to Hiver (2015), no matter to which immunity type a teacher belongs, destabilizing problems are unavoidable in teachers' real lives. During the qualitative phase, the participants constantly talked about the destabilizing problems that had their roots in their personal life. All three types of teachers mentioned personal destabilizing problems although immunocompromised teachers pointed to them more frequently. The category of personal destabilizing events had four

subcategories: demographic characteristics, teachers' negative attitudes toward their job, teachers' insufficient knowledge, and negative personality traits.

The participants frequently alluded to demographic characteristics, namely age, degree, years of experience, second jobs, and academic activities as factors that could influence their immunity. Such expressions as "as I get older", "as I become more experienced", "as I was an MA student," indicated the effect of demographic characteristics that appeared frequently in the qualitative data. As an example, K considered increasing years of experience as a factor that threatened his immunity.

*As I became more experienced, I became a less effective teacher. Teaching the same textbooks again and again changed me into a very uncreative teacher and my job into a boring routine.*

The second sub-category of personal destabilizing events was the teachers' negative attitude toward their job. Some of the participants had a cynical preoccupation with their job and some others gradually grew a gloomy outlook of their job resulting in lack of immunity. As an example, L, an immunocompromised teacher commented on the issue as follows:

*I was among the top 500 rankings in the foreign-language section of Konkoor and I was very enthusiastic to become a good English teacher. I tried hard to make myself ready in every way imaginable for my future job. You can't imagine what happened! I have been teaching the English alphabet to seventh-grade students (first year of secondary school) in a small village for 6 years. It's not meaningful or satisfactory for me. I feel suppressed and began to develop a pessimistic view of my job. Sometimes I've even been thought about quitting the job.*

Teachers' insufficient knowledge was the third sub-category. Some of the participants viewed the insufficiency of their English proficiency as a source of fatigue and exhaustion resulting in decreasing immunity. One of them considered his weakness of speaking English as a source of inefficiency:

*I'm not proficient in speaking English. A lot of my students who have learned English in private institutes are far better than me in speaking skills. Sometimes they laugh at me when I try to speak. It's embarrassing!*

Some other teachers pointed to their lack of pedagogical knowledge such as teaching methodologies or methods of assessment and how they negatively affected their career and their sense of immunity. O, an immunocompromised teacher, considered his incompetency to work with technological devices as a source of disappointment:

*I wasn't able to work with computers or other technical devices. When I had to play an audio file or project slides on a projector in the classroom, I got confused and embarrassed. My technological illiteracy lowered my self-confidence to a great extent and I think it was a threat to my feeling of immunity.*

Throughout the qualitative data, there were some statements about negative personality traits that were regarded as destabilizing events. As examples, two teachers called themselves "extreme introvert" and "severely anxious" and explained

how these personality traits had hurt their career. In an extreme form, one of the participants mentioned her chronic depression. He regarded his psychological disorders as the source of inefficiency. Therefore, negative personality traits were regarded as the last sub-category.

## Discussion

This mixed-method study made a contribution to the rather scarce literature on EFL teachers' immunity in the context of Iran. Previous studies have mainly focused on finding the most dominant immunity types and immunity formation of teachers through their developmental path (Hiver, 2017; Ordem, 2017; Saydem, 2019; Songhory et al., 2018). The present study, however, went further and explored the destabilizing disturbances that Iranian EFL teachers confront at work. Destabilizing events are important to investigate because they trigger the formation of teacher immunity (Hiver & Dornyei, 2017).

The results indicated that destabilizing triggers of teachers' immunity are of three types: educational, organizational, and personal. Educational triggers are the most common type. The results also revealed the subdivisions for the three types of destabilizing events. Hiver and Dornyei (2017) have pointed to some examples of educational and organizational triggers such as managing destructive student behavior and delinquency, or punitive evaluations and accountability measures that determine a teacher's continued employment, which is in line with the findings of the present study. Moreover, Pourbahram and Sadeghi (2020) alluded to some of the EFL teachers' stressors such as their personality traits and students' problems. However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have systematically focused on this issue in Iranian context.

Previous studies have investigated educational stressors and their negative effects on teachers' professional characteristics such as on burnout, resilience, attitudes to teaching, efficacy, and coping strategies which are all the components of teacher immunity (Akbari & Eghtesadi, 2017; Roohani & Dayeri, 2019; Shirazizade et al., 2019; Esmae'li & Afzali, 2020). Contrary to their findings, results of the present study showed that stressors do not necessarily have negative effects on teachers' immunity. There are many teachers among the participants who have developed a high sense of productive immunity despite a lot of stressors. They have a very good sense of efficiency and a positive attitude toward their job. They try to keep themselves updated in terms of teaching and assessment methods and they do not feel frustrated and exhausted even after many years of working. The logic behind this idea is the fact that protection outcomes are always evolved out of defensive responses to disorders and disturbances (Hiver, 2017).

The findings revealed that productively immunized teachers mentioned destabilizing triggers less than other types of immunity in all three categories. The reason can be the fact that they do not consider many stressors even as stressors. Qualitative and quantitative results of the study showed high levels of coping and resilience among the productively immunized teachers. They reacted to the majority of problems by finding appropriate solutions. Among three categories of triggering events, they commented on organizational problems more than two other categories.

The reason behind this finding may be the fact that organizational policies of education are determined at macro level and teachers are not generally involved to decide about them (Kaseorg, 2017; Rabiei et al., 2019). Therefore, they are harder to deal with compared to the other two groups.

Maladaptively immunized teachers referred to the triggering events more than two other groups. They also had the highest frequency of mentioning stressors in both educational and organizational categories. The reason behind this finding is that these types of teachers showed the lowest level of coping and resilience among the participants. Confronting the stressors, they usually grew enraged and treated the students in a cynical and cold fashion. They had a pessimistic view toward their job and did not have a good relationship with other colleagues. Results of the study about maladaptively immunized teachers are in line with some previous studies which investigated the features of teachers with high levels of burnout (Akbari & Eghtesadi, 2017; Baleghizadeh & Amiri Shayesteh, 2020; Jabbarpour, 2016).

Immunocompromised teachers who have not developed any forms of immunity, whether negative or positive, alluded to personal stressors more than the other two groups. As can be seen in the results of the study, while this group of teachers reached high levels of coping and openness to change, they indicated medium to low levels of self-efficiency and resilience. They were pessimistic toward their job, and they treated their students in an emotionless and mechanical fashion. Confronting the destabilizing triggers, they mostly blamed themselves and excessively asked other people including their colleagues and friends for help. That seems to be the reason why they pointed to the personal triggers more than the other two groups as they developed a negative viewpoint toward their own level of knowledge, personality traits and, demographic features.

Furthermore, the findings in the quantitative part of the study indicated the highest distribution of maladaptively immunized teachers among the participants. This is in line with Songhori, Ghonsooly, & Afraz (2018) who found maladaptive immunity as a dominant type of immunity among Iranian EFL teachers.

In this regard, Maghsoudi (2021) explored the immunity levels of the student-teachers at teacher education universities in Iran in a recent study. The results indicated that positive or productive immunity type was dominant among the participants. The transition on the immunity continuum from dominantly productive to dominantly maladaptive while transferring from university to public schools among Iranian EFL teachers highlights the importance of work-related disturbances and perturbations and their effects on their immunity development.

**Conclusion and Implication**

The EFL teachers in Iran face stressors and undesirable conditions that may generate fatigue and cynicism and propel them toward a maladaptive form of immunity. This study was an attempt to find the factors that influence teachers' immunity and interpret the results in light of the features of EFL teachers' immunity types.

The results of the study focusing on teacher immunity are important to consider because teachers are the ones who should create a condition that inspire the learners with excitement and motivation to learn. Learner vision cannot flourish without teacher vision and, for this reason, teacher emotions, goals, enthusiasm, and hope can all be contagious and generate real cognitive counterparts in students (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The results of the study are justifiable because productively immunized teachers are more likely to build an environment conducive to learning and propel the learners toward more enthusiastic and motivated ones.

It is indispensable that these findings be taken into accounts by the Ministry of Education and decision-makers at macro-level to prevent maladaptive immunity formation among EFL teachers by dealing with some organizational and educational problems such as inadequate payment and reward, lack of equipment and facilities in the school especially in suburban areas, teachers' lack of autonomy, and inadequate teacher training. They can also hold training courses for the teachers in a systematic way to update their knowledge about English teaching and testing methods. The findings also have implications for public schools' staff and English teachers because having knowledge of the stressors and the notion of immunity can increase teachers' awareness about their own work-related problems and immunity level. It encourages them to reflect on their job status and deal with their personal destabilizing events. In sum, we hope that the results of the present study help the Iranian community of EFL to move toward higher levels of immunity.

Several limitations need to be considered. First, the interviews were conducted in participants' native language, based on their preferences, to better reflect their feelings and thoughts. Further research is needed to apply other techniques for collecting data, such as observation (this technique was not applied in this study because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Also, the participants of the study were selected from just two provinces of Iran because of ease of accessibility. It is advisable to expand the population under study to other provinces.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A**

**Language Teacher Immunity Questionnaire**

We would like you to answer how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by choosing a number from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Please do not leave out any items.

| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Teaching Self-Efficacy*** | | | | | | |
| 1. If I really try hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students. | | | | | | |
| 2. When all factors are considered, I am a powerful influence on my students' success in the classroom. | | | | | | |
| 3. I do not have confidence in my professional ability to help students learn. | | | | | | |
| 4. I have enough training and experience to deal with almost any learning problem in the classroom. | | | | | | |
| 5. I am not certain that I am making a difference in the lives of my students. | | | | | | |
| 6. I can deal effectively with the problems of my students. | | | | | | |
| 7. I feel I am positively influencing my students' lives through my teaching. | | | | | | |
| ***Burnout*** | | | | | | |
| 8. At school I feel burned out from my work. | | | | | | |
| 9. I feel that teaching is hardening me emotionally. | | | | | | |
| 10. There are days at school when I feel vulnerable. | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. I am emotionally drained by teaching. | | | | | | |
| 12. There are days when I feel insecure at school. | | | | | | |
| ***Resilience*** | | | | | | |
| 13. I can get through difficult times because I've experienced difficulty before. | | | | | | |
| 14. Failures double my motivation to succeed as a teacher. | | | | | | |
| 15. I have a hard time making it through stressful events. | | | | | | |
| 16. I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times. | | | | | | |
| 17. It is hard for me to recover when something bad happens. | | | | | | |
| ***Attitudes Toward Teaching*** | | | | | | |
| 18. I enjoy working as a teacher because it brings me pleasure. | | | | | | |
| 19. Teaching is my life and I can't imagine giving it up. | | | | | | |
| 20. Teaching brings me very little satisfaction. | | | | | | |
| 21. If I could choose an occupation today, I would not choose to be a teacher. | | | | | | |
| 22. I am tempted to leave the teaching profession. | | | | | | |
| ***Openness to Change*** | | | | | | |
| 23. As a teacher, I prefer the familiar to the unknown. | | | | | | |
| 24. I do not get impatient when there are no clear answers or solutions to my problems as a teacher. | | | | | | |
| 25. I get frustrated when my work is unfamiliar and outside my comfort zone as a teacher. | | | | | | |
| 26. In my teaching, I find it hard to give up on something that has worked for me in the | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| past, even if it is no longer very successful. | | | | | | |
| 27. The "tried and true" ways of teaching are the best. | | | | | | |
| 28. As a teacher, I like it when things are uncertain or unpredictable. | | | | | | |
| *Classroom Affectivity* | | | | | | |
| 29. At school or in the classroom I often feel upset. | | | | | | |
| 30. While teaching I regularly feel depressed. | | | | | | |
| 31. I regularly feel inspired at school or in the classroom. | | | | | | |
| 32. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me in the classroom than bad. | | | | | | |
| 33. It's hard to imagine anyone getting excited about teaching. | | | | | | |
| 34. In my teaching I always look on the bright side of things. | | | | | | |
| *Coping* | | | | | | |
| 35. When problems arise at work, I accept what has happened and learn to live with it. | | | | | | |
| 36. When I am under a lot of stress, I just avoid thinking or doing anything about the situation. | | | | | | |
| 37. When things get really stressful, I try to come up with a strategy about what to do. | | | | | | |
| 38. When I encounter a bad situation at school, I look for something good in what is happening. | | | | | | |
| 39. I don't feel that I can cope with problems that come my way. | | | | | | |

## Appendix B

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Please answer the following question about your job as an Iranian EFL teacher and explain if your answers have been changed during your professional life (from start up to now)

1. What do you *think*? (e.g., your philosophy about teaching and your reasons for being a teacher)?

2. How do you *feel?* (e.g., the emotions you experience and show others as a teacher)?

3. What do you *believe* (e.g., how you see yourselves and others, and your attitude to the world around you)?

4. What do you *do* and why (e.g., what are the conflict and challenges in your professional life and how you act when you experience)?

5. What do you *want* (e.g., what are your motives or desires as an English teacher)?

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