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A Qualitative Inquiry into Iranian EFL Teachers' Immunity Development

ABSTRACT

Despite the critical role of teacher immunity in the professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, scant qualitative research attention has been paid to the exploration of the means through which language teachers improve their immunity. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate how five Iranian EFL teachers formed and developed their immunity despite the professional hurdles they had experienced. The qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The results of thematic analysis indicated that the EFL teachers experienced four stages of triggering, coupling, realigning, and stabilizing to reconfigure and develop their immunity. The EFL teachers' practices and experiences at each stage were also identified. The findings of this study implied the importance of adaptive classroom management skills, coping strategies, exploratory approach to teaching, and novel teaching strategies in the process of language teacher immunity. Finally, implications were offered.

Keywords: Language teacher immunity; immunity developmental stages; EFL teachers.

Introduction

The quality of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education depends not only on teachers' pedagogical knowledge and instructional expertise but also on their capacity to withstand the complex psychological, emotional, and organizational challenges that characterize contemporary educational environments. Language teachers routinely encounter heavy workloads, curriculum reforms, accountability pressures, learner diversity, technological changes, classroom management difficulties, and increasing professional expectations. These multifaceted demands can gradually erode teachers' motivation, diminish instructional quality, and threaten their professional well-being if they are not equipped with effective psychological resources to respond adaptively. Consequently, recent scholarship has increasingly shifted from focusing exclusively on teacher

competence toward understanding the psychological mechanisms that enable teachers to remain motivated, resilient, engaged, and professionally effective despite persistent adversity (1-3).

Within positive psychology and second language teacher education, teacher well-being has emerged as a central construct because emotionally healthy teachers are more likely to establish supportive learning environments, sustain instructional quality, and promote positive learner outcomes. Rather than viewing teachers merely as transmitters of knowledge, contemporary perspectives recognize them as dynamic professionals whose emotional experiences, cognitive appraisals, interpersonal relationships, and workplace contexts continuously shape their instructional behaviors. Ecological approaches further argue that teacher well-being develops through ongoing interactions among individual characteristics, institutional environments, and broader sociocultural influences, emphasizing that sustainable professional functioning requires both personal and contextual resources (1, 4, 5).

Research has consistently demonstrated that teaching is one of the most emotionally demanding professions. Continuous exposure to stressors such as disruptive student behavior, excessive administrative responsibilities, limited institutional support, organizational uncertainty, and changing educational policies contributes to emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and professional burnout. Organizational justice, workplace uncertainty, and stressful working conditions further intensify these challenges, making psychological adaptation essential for maintaining teaching effectiveness. At the same time, school environments that support teachers' autonomy and satisfy their basic psychological needs contribute substantially to their professional well-being and long-term commitment to teaching (6-9).

Within language education specifically, these challenges become even more complex because EFL teachers must simultaneously manage linguistic diversity, learner motivation, intercultural communication, evolving pedagogical innovations, and continuously changing instructional methodologies. Implementing educational innovations often requires teachers to reconstruct their professional identities while adapting to new curricular expectations and classroom realities. Successful innovation therefore depends not only on institutional reforms but also on teachers' psychological readiness to embrace change and sustain effective instructional practices throughout periods of professional transition (10-12).

Against this background, the construct of language teacher immunity has attracted growing scholarly attention as a comprehensive explanatory framework for understanding how language teachers adapt to professional adversity. Originally conceptualized within Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, teacher immunity refers to a self-organizing psychological defense mechanism that gradually develops through teachers' interactions with recurring professional challenges. Rather than representing a static personality trait, immunity is viewed as an adaptive dynamic system that evolves over time as teachers respond to destabilizing experiences, reorganize their coping resources, and establish relatively stable patterns of professional functioning. Importantly, immunity can develop in both productive and maladaptive forms, making its developmental trajectory particularly significant for teacher education and professional development (13-16).

Theoretical work further suggests that productive immunity enables teachers to maintain optimism, motivation, commitment, adaptability, and instructional effectiveness despite repeated professional setbacks. Conversely, maladaptive immunity may result in emotional detachment, resistance to change, cynicism, rigid instructional practices, and declining professional engagement. This dual nature highlights that immunity should not simply be interpreted as resistance to stress but rather as a dynamic process through which teachers continuously negotiate professional challenges while reconstructing their identities and pedagogical beliefs (15, 16).

Growing empirical evidence has confirmed the importance of teacher immunity across diverse educational contexts. Studies have demonstrated positive associations between teacher immunity and work engagement, psychological well-being, emotional functioning, instructional quality, autonomy, resilience, buoyancy, and professional commitment. Teachers with stronger

productive immunity generally report greater psychological adjustment, higher instructional confidence, and stronger motivation to remain committed to the profession despite workplace adversity. These findings collectively position teacher immunity as one of the fundamental psychological resources supporting sustainable professional functioning in language education (5, 17-20).

The relationship between teacher immunity and work engagement has received particular research attention because engaged teachers demonstrate greater enthusiasm, persistence, instructional creativity, and commitment to student learning. Empirical evidence indicates that productive immunity contributes substantially to teachers' willingness to invest emotional and cognitive resources in their instructional responsibilities. Moreover, immunity appears to strengthen the positive influence of psychological well-being on professional engagement while simultaneously reducing vulnerability to burnout and occupational fatigue. Such findings emphasize that enhancing immunity may serve as an effective strategy for improving both teacher welfare and educational quality (19-21).

Teacher emotions also play an essential role in immunity development. Positive emotional experiences promote adaptive instructional practices and strengthen teachers' psychological resources, whereas chronic anxiety, frustration, and anger may undermine professional functioning. Longitudinal evidence suggests that teacher behaviors influence learners' enjoyment and motivation while simultaneously shaping teachers' own emotional experiences. Likewise, hope, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience help teachers maintain optimism under stressful circumstances and facilitate adaptive coping with professional demands. Consequently, emotional processes should be considered integral components of immunity development rather than isolated psychological variables (2, 5, 22, 23).

Recent studies have increasingly explored the interplay between immunity and other positive psychological constructs. Psychological well-being, mindfulness, resilience, grit, buoyancy, autonomy, and work engagement have all been identified as important correlates of productive immunity. Theoretical reviews argue that immunity functions as an integrative mechanism connecting multiple positive psychological resources that collectively enable teachers to maintain professional effectiveness despite recurring adversity. Similarly, resilience enables teachers to recover from setbacks, whereas immunity provides a broader developmental framework through which adaptive responses become stabilized over time (18, 19, 21, 24).

Professional development initiatives have likewise demonstrated promising potential for strengthening teacher immunity. Mentoring programs, post-induction support, supervisory observation, collaborative reflection, and structured professional development opportunities all appear capable of promoting adaptive immunity by encouraging teachers to reflect upon instructional challenges, reconstruct ineffective beliefs, and adopt more productive professional practices. Rather than emerging automatically through teaching experience, immunity appears to require intentional developmental support that enables teachers to transform stressful experiences into opportunities for professional growth (25, 26).

Another growing line of inquiry concerns the influence of contextual variables on immunity. School climate, organizational support, institutional culture, and workplace relationships shape teachers' opportunities to develop adaptive psychological resources. Recent multilevel analyses demonstrate that positive school climates strengthen the beneficial effects of teacher immunity on instructional quality, indicating that immunity develops through interactions between individual and environmental factors rather than solely through personal characteristics. Such findings reinforce ecological perspectives emphasizing the inseparability of teachers from their professional environments (1, 3, 7).

Research has also established meaningful associations between teacher immunity and teaching quality. Teachers with stronger productive immunity are generally more capable of maintaining effective classroom management, providing cognitive activation, supporting learners emotionally, and creating motivating instructional environments. Multilevel structural equation modeling further demonstrates that teacher emotions influence instructional quality partly through their effects on immunity,

suggesting that immunity functions as an important psychological mechanism linking emotional experiences with pedagogical effectiveness (3, 19, 27).

The rapid expansion of online and technology-mediated language education has further highlighted the importance of immunity. The transition toward digital instruction exposed teachers to unprecedented professional uncertainty, technological demands, and changing teacher–student interactions. Evidence from online language teaching indicates that productive immunity enabled teachers to adapt more effectively to these disruptions by facilitating flexible coping strategies, professional persistence, and instructional innovation during periods of educational transformation (28).

Despite these advances, teacher immunity remains a relatively young area of inquiry with several important theoretical and methodological limitations. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on identifying correlates of immunity through quantitative survey designs, leaving many developmental processes insufficiently understood. Although statistical models have clarified relationships between immunity and psychological outcomes, they provide relatively limited insight into how teachers themselves experience, interpret, and gradually construct immunity throughout their professional careers. Consequently, researchers have increasingly emphasized the need for qualitative investigations capable of capturing the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of immunity development (15, 18, 25).

Furthermore, several contextual factors that potentially influence immunity warrant deeper investigation. Teacher autonomy has long been recognized as a critical determinant of professional motivation and instructional innovation, while supportive classroom interactions, positive teacher–student relationships, and emotionally responsive teaching practices contribute to sustainable professional engagement. Humor, constructive interpersonal communication, and learner-centered pedagogies likewise create classroom environments that may reinforce adaptive psychological functioning. Teacher retention research also suggests that strengthening such protective resources is essential for reducing professional attrition, particularly among early-career language teachers (22, 29–31).

Within the Iranian EFL context, the importance of immunity is particularly evident because teachers frequently confront curriculum constraints, examination pressures, heavy teaching loads, and limited institutional resources while simultaneously responding to learners’ diverse academic and emotional needs. Earlier investigations among Iranian teachers have identified the presence of both productive and maladaptive immunity and have highlighted relationships between immunity, burnout, engagement, emotions, autonomy, and professional functioning. Nevertheless, important questions remain regarding the developmental processes through which teachers construct adaptive immunity and transform challenging professional experiences into sustainable psychological strengths (9, 17, 21, 32).

Accordingly, further qualitative exploration is necessary to deepen understanding of how immunity develops through teachers’ lived professional experiences, how contextual and psychological factors interact during this developmental process, and how teacher education programs can facilitate productive immunity that ultimately enhances teacher well-being, instructional quality, and professional sustainability.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to qualitatively explore the developmental process of Iranian EFL teachers’ immunity by examining how they experience, construct, and strengthen productive teacher immunity throughout their professional careers.

Methods and Materials

Participants and setting

The study used a qualitative approach to explore how five Iranian EFL teachers form their immunity. The demographic information of the teachers is presented in Table 1. To ensure the confidentiality issues, pseudonyms were used throughout the manuscript. The participants were teaching intermediate-level proficiency courses. Additionally, all the participants were teaching at public schools and private institutes. To do an in-depth analysis of the participants' shared experiences (Dörnyei, 2008), these five EFL teachers, who indicated lower levels of teacher immunity (measured through L2 teacher immunity scale, developed by Hiver and Dörnyei, 2017), were chosen through homogenous sampling. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. In Dörnyei's typology of purposeful sampling strategies, homogeneous sampling refers to selecting participants who share a set of clearly defined and uniform characteristics. The aim is to create a sample that is as internally similar as possible so that the researcher can focus on a specific subgroup within a population.

English is taught at public and private sectors in Iran. At public sector, secondary-school and high-school students have a compulsory course on English language. In addition, the materials, teaching methodology, and curricular objectives are determined by the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, at private sector, language institutes offer a range of English proficiency courses based on the placement tests they administer.

Table 1. The Demographic Information of the Participants

	Sanaz	Nadia	Arash	Hamta	Omid
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male
Academic Degree	M.A.	M.A.	B.A.	M.A.	Ph.D.
Teaching Experience	5	6	8	9	11

Data Collection Procedure

The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five EFL teachers. Utilizing semi-structured interviews lets researchers achieve an in-depth understanding of the way L2 teacher immunity can be formed. The interviews were held in a calm atmosphere in order to let the participants explain their ideas freely. Initially, the greeting was done and then a series of questions were asked. The interview questions were guided by the related literature, specifically by the study of Hiver (2017), and aimed to clarify how the EFL teachers' immunity system could be improved. Each interview took about 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to identify patterns in the data collected from interviews with the EFL teachers. The initial stage was coding the transcribed data. Next, the participants' viewpoints were cross-analyzed and sorted into subthemes. Then, the emerged subthemes were analyzed based on their content similarity to form main themes, which are followed with data extracts. This process allowed for the identification of specific themes related to L2 teacher immunity development. MAXQDA version 2020 was used to collate the qualitative data into themes.

Findings and Results

The study aimed to investigate how five EFL teachers shaped their immunity in the context of Iran. The thematic analysis indicated four main themes (as shown in Figure 1) and nine sub-themes (as depicted in Table 2).

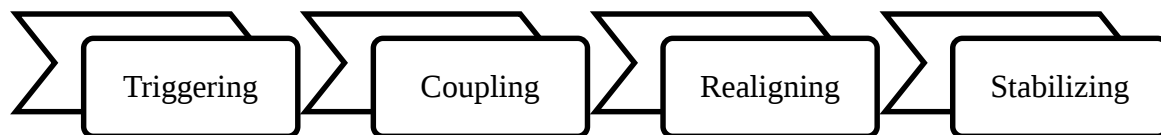


Figure 1. The Stages of Immunity Development Among EFL Teachers

At the triggering stage, the participants wanted to improve their classroom management skills, to motivate their students, and regulate their emotions in the classroom. For triggering, several components were found that highlighted the main concerns of EFL teachers. In fact, at the coupling phase, there were a series of subdomains which showed how these teachers tried to adjust their immunity system. At the coupling stage, they tried to develop their coping strategies and show more support toward their students. The third stage was realigning, which involved activities aimed at achieving stability and coherence in the immunity system. At the realignment stage, they sought new solutions for their previously-encountered teaching challenges and recognize the significant role of learners' individual differences in their teaching. The final stage was stabilizing, which involved changing traditional teaching practices to maintain the new outcomes. At the stabilization stage, teachers applied new instructional strategies and gained higher levels of self-efficacy in tackling professional hurdles.

Table 2 displays the frequency of components for each developmental stage. The ongoing need for developing classroom management skills was the main concern of the participants, which triggered them to reconfigure their immunity. As shown in Table 2, improving the repertoire of coping skills was the most frequent component of L2 immunity development during the coupling phase. In the realigning stage, the teachers could take an exploratory approach to find new solutions for the emerging challenges. According to the results, EFL teachers mostly applied new teaching strategies at the stabilization stage to remain more immune to job-embedded difficulties.

Table 2. The Frequency of Subdomains of Developmental Stages of Teacher Immunity

Stage	Component	Frequency
Triggering	Query for adaptive classroom management skills	14
	Need for emotion regulation strategies	10
	Demand for learner motivation	8
Coupling	Search of proper coping strategies	11
	Support toward language learners	9
Realigning	New solutions with an exploratory approach	10
	Consideration of learners' individual differences	8
Stabilizing	Application of novel teaching strategies	7
	Self-efficacy in tackling challenges	5

In the following section, data excerpts are presented and the qualitative findings are discussed.

Triggering

The findings indicated that EFL teachers felt the need to adaptively form their immunity system against a series of challenges. The main problems, according to the participants were lack of motivation on the part of language learners, lack of appropriate classroom management skills and proper emotion regulation strategies on the part of language teachers.

Query for adaptive classroom management skills

The majority of the participants felt that improving their management skills would boost their self-confidence. Hamta, an EFL teacher with nine years of teaching experience, admitted that she had scarcely been assisted in managing disruptive behavior in the classroom. She regarded her need to improve classroom management skills as the beginning of forming her teacher immunity.

I think remaining immune to daily problems requires to be skillful in classroom management. A knowledgeable EFL teacher without plan for managing the class will experience burn out. (Hamta, Interview, December, 2022)

Another participant noted:

I assume that classroom management is a key factor in remaining immune against many challenges that a teacher can experience in a class. I think I should develop this skill more. (Nadia, Interview, December, 2022)

Need for emotion regulation strategies

Most of the participants noted the criticality of managing emotions and building positive relationships with their students. However, as the participants expressed, there have been limited opportunities to learn how to regulate their emotions. The following excerpt unveils this issue:

A successful language teacher needs to rethink how to regulate emotions in the class. I think if we lose our temper after every single disruptive behavior, the disastrous negative feelings will spread in the classroom. (Nadia, Interview, December, 2022)

Hamta, an EFL teacher with nine years of teaching English in public schools and private language institutes, noted:

In language classes, teachers may experience a wide range of emotions. because negative emotions may negatively affect our teaching, we should become aware of regulating our emotions to remain positive and energetic.

Demand for learner motivation

All the participants reported that learners' demotivation was one of the controversial problems in their career. Improving students' motivation to learn English language was a common goal of the EFL teachers. Sanaz, a young EFL teacher with five years of teaching experience, believed that language learners' low motivation would be a threat to their job satisfaction. She said:

Honestly, learners' limited motivation is a serious issue which needs to be tackled first. I always try to motivate the students to let them enjoy from language learning. Meanwhile, I can also remain safe from burnout. (Sanaz, Interview, December, 2022)

Arash who had eight years of teaching experience believed that:

I think motivating with learners is a major step in the process of developing a sense of immunity. When students are demotivated, I lose my engagement and motivating which in turn causes teacher burnout. (Arash, Interview, December, 2022)

Coupling

The qualitative data analysis showed that EFL teachers, who initially synchronized their immunity system, tried to cope with challenges resiliently while keeping a supportive attitude toward language learners in the classroom context.

Search for proper coping strategies

The analysis of qualitative data showed that the EFL teachers looked for suitable means to cope with daily hurdles. Despite her teaching experience, Hamta believed that enhancing her ability to solve the problems resiliently was another step to remain immune in the profession. She said:

New coping techniques are needed for dealing with the problems in each class. A variety of such techniques can be helpful in case of dealing with unexpected issues. (Hamta, Interview, December, 2022)

Similarly, Omid, an English teacher of public and private schools, mentioned:

Teaching a dynamic procedure, and teachers should constantly search for innovative strategies to teach better, address the problems and remain resistant in workplace setting. In this way, they can experience a sense of immunity and well-being. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)

Support towards language learners

The majority of the participants believed that reconfiguring their immunity after a destabilizing event was a process which impacted language learners as well. They noted that showing support and enthusiasm played a key role in remedying the situation. As echoed by the participants, the language teachers who offer the students emotional support were more likely to adapt themselves to the emerging difficulties which is needed for realignment. Sanaz asserted this point:

In my classes, after a disruptive behavior, I try to remain calm and supportive. I think, if I react sensitively, I will lose my students' trust and subsequently my position. (Sanaz, Interview, December, 2022)

Regarding this issue, Hamta had a similar opinion and said:

Nowadays, learners need to be supported more by their teachers. Sometimes, they want their teachers to listen to their learning problems. Thus, I try to be supportive in my pedagogical practices to lower their affective filter. (Hamta, Interview, December, 2022)

Realigning

The analysis of data showed that the teachers reached realigning stage after experiencing a refreshed sense of self-actualization. In fact, at this stage of immunity development, the teachers discovered new ways of achieving positive outcomes and took language learners' individual differences into account to better understand how to reframe their immunity.

New solutions with an exploratory approach

All the EFL teachers who participated in this study realigned their immunity through adopting an exploratory approach to their instruction. Analyzing the transcriptions showed that the teachers were inclined toward finding innovative methods in teaching. Such a discovery-oriented teaching was an example of the realigning stage of immunity development. Omid, an EFL teacher with 11 years of teaching English at public and private sectors, noted:

Think I am determined enough to explore, find, and practice new solutions for the problems I face in my classes. I like this kind of innovative activities which refresh my knowledge as well. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)

Nadia believed that finding innovative ways in teaching can be an effective way to guarantee teaching quality and improve teacher immunity. She noted:

As an English teacher, I make attempt to find innovative ways to help my students learn better. As a result of better learning and higher motivation, I feel happy and self-confident. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)

Consideration of learners' individual differences

An interesting finding was that EFL teachers who accepted the individual differences of their students as a potential source of emerging challenges in managing the class were more successful at reconfiguring their immunity. In fact, the participants mentioned that considering the differences between learners (e.g., personalities, psychological performance, socioeconomic states, etc.) was required to shift from a disequilibrium to a balanced classroom atmosphere.

Learners are like different islands. I typically try to use alternative activities based on my students' preferences and their individual differences. Although this is not that easy, it helps them remain engaged during the lesson. (Arash, Interview, December, 2022)

Omid stressed the necessity of considering learners' individual differences in effective language teaching and expressed:

Successful language teaching is tied with a clear understanding learners' difference. We should not only take care of their learning needs, preferences, and styles but also their personalities, feelings, and emotions. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)

Stabilizing

The qualitative results showed that stabilizing was the fourth level of forming immunity among the EFL teachers. This stage involved a change in instructional practices and a sense of self-efficacy in various conditions.

Application of novel teaching strategies

When novel initiatives become stable in teaching repertoire of EFL teachers, they are reaching the final stage of L2 immunity. Promoting their defensive mechanisms while dealing with job-embedded disturbances hinged on a state of stabilization. This study revealed that the majority of the participants employed a series of instructional strategies to make their immunity system configured. Nadia stated:

Personally speaking, I did not like traditional teaching methods when I was a student. That is why my endeavors are focused on a different instruction. I mean, creativity and novelty should constitute any teaching. (Nadia, Interview, December, 2022)

Regarding the application of new strategies at the stabilization stage of immunity development, Omid said:

When I practice a new teaching strategy and I see it works, I try to include it in my teaching repertoire. In this way, I can cultivate innovation in my teaching which can increase learners' motivation and decrease their boredom. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)

Self-efficacy in tackling challenges

The participants expressed that having a mentor would help them better manage the various challenges they face. Experienced EFL teachers also made efforts to regulate their professional activities, which helped stabilize the situation. The mentor also provided advice on classroom discipline. The quotes below show how the participants viewed the idea of controlling challenges related to their context which helped them experience higher levels of self-efficacy.

I think becoming self-confident and feeling effective are outcomes of coping with job-related challenges. I consider an immune language teacher to be self-efficacious with a power to control the situation. (Arash, Interview, December, 2022)

When I can identify a practical solution for any problem in teaching, I feel high levels of efficacy in my work. This self-efficacy acts like a motivator for me to resiliently address other problematic issues. (Sanaz, Interview, December, 2022)

In sum, the present study revealed that EFL teachers should be able to cope with challenges and adapt to changes in order to remain immune during the profession. To respond appropriately to job-related disturbances required EFL teachers to go through stages of triggering, coupling, realignment, and stabilization. Finally, Table 3 shows a detailed presentation of the themes, their sub-themes, and related quotes.

Table 3. Themes, Sub-themes, and Related Quotes

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Triggering	Query for adaptive classroom management skills	Every class has its own features. So, I need to adapt my classroom management approach. It is sometimes a burden. Anyhow, I have to do it. (Sanaz, Interview, December, 2022)
	Need for emotion regulation strategies	Controlling the negative emotions and strengthening the positive feelings in the class are of crucial importance. I know that, but I still need to have control over my own emotions. (Hamta, Interview, December, 2022)
	Demand for learner motivation	These days, a dominant issue is learners' low motivation. To be a successful language teacher, I need to find various means to keep them motivated during the semester. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)
Coupling	Search for proper coping strategies	New coping strategies coupled with our previous coping techniques can be like a shield. New coping strategies are needed because every day we face new challenges in the classes. (Nadia, Interview, December, 2022)
	Support towards language learners	I try to emotionally support my students. Considering their whole-being helps build a sense of trust and safety in the class which prevents the occurrence of some disruptive behaviors. (Nadia, Interview, December, 2022)
Realigning	New solutions with an exploratory approach	I like to be an adventurous teacher who explores new things. I think this generation of learners do not welcome traditional beliefs and practices. (Arash, Interview, December, 2022)
	Consideration of learners' individual differences	It is natural. We are different. This difference should be respected to help teachers and learners live in a safe, supportive classroom atmosphere. I try to diagnose my students' differences, at different levels. (Omid, Interview, December, 2022)
Stabilizing	Application of novel teaching strategies	Honestly, I was to some extent resistant to change in my teaching. But later on, I recognized that innovative teaching practices keep learners engaged, which in turn helps me remain committed and happy. (Sanaz, Interview, December, 2022)
	Self-efficacy in tackling challenges	During these years, despite ups and downs, I become more self-confident after overcoming each stressor. Believing in my ability to solve the problems is not only a destination but also a catalyst to thrive in the profession. (Hamta, Interview, December, 2022)

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore how Iranian EFL teachers develop their language teacher immunity. The results of thematic analysis indicated that teacher immunity developed through four interconnected stages: triggering, coupling, realigning, and stabilizing. These stages showed that immunity development is not an immediate psychological reaction to professional difficulty, but a gradual process through which teachers encounter destabilizing classroom events, search for adaptive resources, reconstruct their instructional perspectives, and finally internalize new practices as part of their professional repertoire. This finding is strongly aligned with the theoretical foundations of language teacher immunity, which conceptualize immunity as a dynamic self-organizing system emerging from teachers' repeated encounters with professional stressors and challenges (13-16). In this sense, the findings support the idea that language teacher immunity can function as a protective professional mechanism, but its value depends on whether it develops in a productive or maladaptive direction (16).

The first stage, triggering, included teachers' need for adaptive classroom management skills, emotion regulation strategies, and learner motivation. This finding indicates that Iranian EFL teachers began to reconfigure their immunity when they experienced classroom events that challenged their instructional confidence and emotional stability. Classroom management appeared as one of the most salient triggers, suggesting that teachers' sense of professional control is closely tied to their ability to manage learner behavior, maintain classroom order, and respond flexibly to unpredictable instructional situations. This result is consistent with studies showing that classroom management and culturally shaped expectations of student behavior influence teachers' instructional confidence and professional adjustment (12). It also corresponds with research on teaching innovation, because teachers who face classroom disruption often need to revise fixed instructional routines and adopt more flexible pedagogical practices (10, 11).

The triggering role of emotion regulation also confirms the emotional nature of language teaching. Participants emphasized that negative emotions, if not regulated, could affect the classroom climate and weaken teachers' professional functioning. This result aligns with studies showing that teachers' emotional regulation is closely related to their psychological well-being, work engagement, and professional sustainability (5, 23). In EFL classrooms, teachers' emotional behavior also shapes learners' enjoyment, anxiety, attitudes, and motivation; therefore, teachers' ability to manage their own emotional responses has direct implications for both teacher immunity and learner experience (22). The finding also supports the ecological view of teacher well-being, according to which teachers' emotional functioning is shaped by personal, relational, and contextual conditions rather than by individual resilience alone (1).

Learner motivation was another important trigger of immunity development. The teachers reported that students' low motivation created professional pressure and could reduce teachers' engagement and job satisfaction. This finding supports previous evidence that demotivating classroom conditions and professional frustrations may contribute to burnout among Iranian EFL teachers (9). At the same time, it suggests that teachers' immunity is not developed in isolation from learners; rather, it is partly shaped through the motivational atmosphere of the classroom. When learners are disengaged, teachers may experience a sense of instructional ineffectiveness, which can destabilize their professional identity and push them to search for new strategies. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that teacher behavior, learner enjoyment, and learner motivation are reciprocally connected in foreign language classrooms (22, 30).

The second stage, coupling, involved the search for proper coping strategies and support toward language learners. This finding suggests that after experiencing destabilizing professional challenges, teachers attempted to connect previous experiences with new coping mechanisms in order to restore balance. The emphasis on coping is consistent with the literature on teacher resilience, which shows that teachers' ability to respond constructively to adversity is central to their continued

professional engagement (24). It also aligns with research on hope, stress, coping, and well-being in language teachers, suggesting that adaptive coping resources enable teachers to reinterpret difficulty and maintain psychological energy in demanding professional situations (2). In this study, coping strategies served as a bridge between initial disturbance and later professional reorganization, confirming that immunity develops through active psychological and pedagogical adjustment rather than passive endurance.

The finding that support toward learners was part of the coupling stage further shows that teacher immunity has an interpersonal dimension. Teachers did not merely protect themselves from classroom stressors; rather, they attempted to maintain emotional support, trust, and positive relationships with learners. This is important because productive immunity should not result in emotional withdrawal or defensive detachment. Instead, adaptive immunity enables teachers to remain responsive and engaged while managing professional stress. This result is compatible with positive psychology perspectives that emphasize teacher thriving, relational well-being, and supportive classroom interaction as essential components of sustainable language teaching (1, 4). It also supports the view that teachers' well-being and learners' classroom experiences are interconnected, because emotionally supportive teacher behavior can reduce classroom tension and improve the quality of language learning (22, 30).

The third stage, realigning, consisted of searching for new solutions through an exploratory approach and considering learners' individual differences. This result indicates that teachers moved beyond immediate coping and began to reconstruct their pedagogical beliefs and practices. The exploratory approach found in this study is aligned with research emphasizing innovation, action research, and materials development as pathways through which language teachers can respond to classroom complexity (10, 11). In the context of teacher immunity, this means that productive development requires teachers to transform challenges into opportunities for inquiry. Rather than simply repeating familiar strategies, immune teachers become more willing to test alternative methods, reflect on outcomes, and revise their instructional decisions.

Considering learners' individual differences was also central to realignment. Participants recognized that students differ in motivation, personality, learning needs, emotional states, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and that such differences must inform instructional decision-making. This finding extends previous discussions of teacher autonomy and agency in EFL teaching by showing that autonomy is not only the freedom to make pedagogical choices, but also the professional capacity to adapt instruction to the realities of learners (29). It also corresponds with studies on teacher immunity and engagement, which show that adaptive immunity is related to teachers' openness, autonomy, emotional involvement, and professional flexibility (17, 21). Therefore, realignment can be understood as the point at which teachers begin to rebuild their professional identity around flexibility, learner awareness, and instructional problem-solving.

The fourth stage, stabilizing, included the application of novel teaching strategies and self-efficacy in tackling professional challenges. This finding indicates that immunity development becomes stable when teachers internalize newly discovered strategies and experience greater confidence in their ability to manage future problems. The application of novel teaching strategies supports the idea that immunity is closely connected to professional growth and instructional innovation. When teachers see that new strategies improve classroom engagement and reduce stress, those strategies become part of their stable teaching repertoire. This finding aligns with studies showing that teacher immunity is associated with work engagement, psychological well-being, and teaching quality across different EFL contexts (3, 20, 27).

Self-efficacy emerged as another important feature of stabilization. Participants reported that overcoming challenges increased their confidence and motivated them to address future difficulties more effectively. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that teacher immunity is associated with buoyancy, well-being, and engagement (19). It also supports research on online language teaching, where immune teachers were better able to adapt to instructional disruption and maintain

professional functioning under changing conditions (28). In this regard, self-efficacy can be interpreted as both an outcome and a reinforcer of productive immunity: teachers become more confident after solving problems, and this confidence then strengthens their ability to cope with later stressors.

The results also support recent work showing that teacher immunity can be enhanced through professional development, mentoring, and supervisory observation. The teachers' movement from triggering to stabilizing suggests that immunity is not fixed; it can be shaped through reflective experience, institutional support, and pedagogical experimentation. Studies on post-induction mentoring and professional development courses have shown that structured support can contribute to stronger teacher immunity by helping teachers reinterpret difficulties, receive feedback, and adopt more adaptive professional strategies (25, 26). Therefore, the present findings add qualitative support to the claim that teacher immunity should be intentionally addressed in teacher education programs rather than left to develop randomly through trial and error.

Moreover, the findings are compatible with research on teacher retention and attrition. Early-career and experienced foreign language teachers may leave the profession when they lack emotional support, professional agency, and adaptive coping resources (31). The four-stage model found in this study suggests that strengthening immunity may contribute to retention by enabling teachers to manage stress, sustain motivation, and reconstruct professional meaning after difficult experiences. In particular, productive immunity may protect teachers from burnout and emotional exhaustion by helping them maintain commitment without becoming rigid, detached, or resistant to change (6-8).

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by showing that Iranian EFL teachers' immunity develops through a progressive and practice-based process. The findings confirm that teacher immunity is shaped by classroom management demands, emotional regulation, learner motivation, coping strategies, learner support, exploratory problem-solving, attention to individual differences, instructional innovation, and self-efficacy. These results are consistent with previous theoretical and empirical studies, while also extending the literature by providing qualitative evidence on the lived developmental process through which EFL teachers move from destabilization to professional stabilization (3, 17, 18, 27, 32).

The present study had several limitations. First, the study was conducted with a small group of Iranian EFL teachers, which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts, language teaching settings, and teacher populations. Second, the study relied on semi-structured interviews, and although interviews provided rich qualitative insights, additional data sources such as classroom observations, reflective journals, and teacher narratives could have strengthened the depth of interpretation. Third, the study focused on teachers' perceptions of immunity development rather than longitudinally tracing actual changes in their classroom behavior over time. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as context-sensitive qualitative evidence rather than as broadly generalizable conclusions.

Future research should examine language teacher immunity development across larger and more diverse samples, including novice teachers, experienced teachers, institute teachers, school teachers, and university instructors. Longitudinal qualitative designs would be especially valuable for tracing how teachers move across the stages of triggering, coupling, realigning, and stabilizing over time. Future studies may also compare productive and maladaptive immunity development and investigate how institutional culture, mentoring, teacher autonomy, online teaching, learner behavior, and professional development programs influence the direction of immunity formation. Mixed-methods studies could further integrate qualitative accounts with quantitative measures of immunity, burnout, engagement, well-being, and instructional quality.

In practice, the findings suggest that teacher education programs should explicitly address immunity development as part of professional preparation and in-service training. Teacher educators, supervisors, and school administrators should help EFL teachers develop classroom management skills, emotion regulation strategies, coping techniques, learner-supportive practices, reflective inquiry habits, and confidence in solving instructional problems. Professional development programs should also

provide opportunities for mentoring, peer observation, collaborative reflection, and experimentation with new teaching strategies. Such support can help teachers transform professional challenges into developmental opportunities and cultivate productive immunity that benefits both teachers and learners.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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