Reconceptualising Authenticity in TESOL: A New Space for Diversity and Inclusion

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This study sought to probe higher education English language professors’ experiences in cultivating their learners’ authenticity. Using Barnett’s (2007) theory of authenticity as the conceptual framework, the researchers explored authenticity as an authentic voice rather than a feature in materials provided by native speakers. The data were collected through interviews and personal documents. The data analysis was based on the interpretation process of modern social science hermeneutics and three core themes were extracted: critical knowledge in English language education, dialectical and reflective praxis, and a flexible and localised curriculum. Indeed, the findings of the study went beyond the exclusive boundary between native and nonnative speakers. It was also revealed that the cultivation of English language learners’ authenticity necessitates a space for diversity and inclusion in addition to epistemological, ontological, and practical spaces. Moreover, the study participants indicated that authenticity can be cultivated in their learners through critical knowledge, which can be acquired through dialogues with not only mainstream voices but also marginalised ones.

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Addressing students’ authenticity in education, Barnett (2007) defined the concept of authenticity as an authentic voice. He also acknowledged that the authentic voice “is distinctively the student’s or, at least, it is her authentically placing herself in the world. Here, the issue is not one of whether some utterance emerges, but rather as to the kind of utterance it is” (p. 90). According to Barnett, it is in an authentic voice that students can believe themselves, open their own selves to new experiences, utter their own unique stories and reasoning, become themselves, and come into critical dialogues with the
surrounding voices. Barnett explained that an authentic voice is not achieved “in isolation from other voices, but, on the contrary, in their company” (p. 43). In fact, an authentic voice is achieved when students are able to hear other voices, immerse themselves in the dominant voices, and modify the existing voices through critical dialogue and reflection. Revolving around Barnett’s definition of students’ authenticity, the present study aimed at reconceptualising authenticity in TESOL as an authentic voice through examining the experiences of nonnative-English-speaking professors in Iran.

In her paper on authenticity in English language teaching (ELT), Buendgens-Kosten (2014) argued that authenticity is a powerful notion in the contemporary ELT professional context. Having reconceptualised authenticity in ELT, however, Pinner (2016) explained that the concept of authenticity is oversimplified in the context of English language teaching and learning because scholars and researchers have restricted this concept to materials. Gilmore (2007) also pointed out that authentic materials are mainly addressed by English language teachers and scholars, because this notion of authenticity “is frequently used as a selling point in the marketing strategies of publishers” (p. 106).

However, in their paper titled “Authenticity in the Adult ESOL Classroom and Beyond,” Roberts and Cooke (2009) acknowledged that authentic materials do not necessarily provide the opportunity for English language learners to be themselves. Indeed, they maintained that authenticity can also be defined “with respect to self-expression and the development of authentic voice” (p. 621). In addition, McKay (2013) referred to the importance of the cultivation of an authentic voice in English language learners and asserted that teachers are key to creating the possibility for learners to express their own voice.

Addressing the boundary between native and nonnative speakers in the context of English language teaching, Gill (2012) also acknowledged that authenticity, as denoting materials produced by native speakers or the intrinsic feature of materials, leads to an exclusive boundary between native and nonnative teachers. Widdowson (1979) and Breen (1985) also argued that authenticity does not reside in texts and materials, but is a feature related to readers’ and hearers’ interpretations. Nonetheless, addressing the distinction between native and nonnative speakers, the current study sought to probe authenticity as an authentic voice whereby the English language learners as nonnative speakers can discover their own voice amidst surrounding voices. Following this objective, we explored English language professors’ experiences in nurturing an authentic voice in their learners. Our participants were nonnative English language professors who worked at Iranian universities. Studying nonnative English language professors from Iran, as a country in the Middle East, can provide the possibility
to hear the voices of Others in the context of foreign language teaching and learning. Samimy (2008) asserted that nonnative-English-speaking teachers are mainly marginalised in TESOL. In addition, addressing research paradigms in the field of language learning and acquisition, Watson-Gegeo (2004) explained that “typically, it has been White Anglo-Euro-American researchers who study and represent mainly non-European ‘Others’ who are not allowed voice to represent themselves as they wish to be or are positioned” (p. 336). But, we—the two researchers of the present study—are also nonnative English language professors, that is, marginalised voices. Watson-Gegeo also suggested that hearing the voice of marginalised Others can lead to paradigm shifts in the language learning and teaching research whereby our views about mind, learning, and language can be reconstructed and revitalised.

In fact, hearing the voice of nonnative English language professors can provide a new possibility for understanding authenticity. Highlighting the importance of negotiation between authenticity and legitimacy in the language classroom, Creese, Blackledge, and Takhi (2014) argued that “we should pay attention to how speakers use the notion of authenticity, to what ideological ends, through which authenticating practices” (p. 939). In this regard, using a modern social science hermeneutic approach, we probed our participants’ experience in cultivating their learners’ authentic voice through qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, we interpret our findings based on Barnett’s (2007) working definition of an authentic voice as well as the existing literature relevant to our topic of enquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Revisiting the existing debate on the concept of authenticity in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL), Roberts and Cooke (2009) highlighted the importance of the cultivation of authentic voice and argued that laying great emphasis on authentic materials “can produce curricula which are too narrowly functionalist and which do not provide affordances for learners to be themselves in the new language” (p. 622). Moreover, Roberts and Cooke asserted that authenticity should be reconceptualised in ESOL in order to provide the possibility for English language learners (ELLs) to present their own selves as agents. With regard to the concept of authenticity in the context of English language teaching, Gilmore (2007) also indicated that
with a concept such as authenticity, which touches on so many areas, it is important to attempt to bridge these divides and consolidate what we know so that sensible decisions can be made in terms of the role that authenticity should have in foreign language learning in the future.

Consequently, in this section, three studies focusing on learners’ authenticity in education in general are reviewed and a theoretical framework is presented for probing English language learners’ authenticity.

In his book *Authenticity and Learning*, Cooper (1983) addressed authenticity of learners and sought to clarify the necessary practices for nurturing authenticity of learners through the examination and interpretation of the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche. He considered self-concern as the representation of authenticity and defined it as the ability to reflect upon one’s personality, to assess the situations in which one is placed, to examine the language one speaks, to reflect on the goals to pursue in one’s life, to consider the values to be put on one’s activities, to examine how one came by one’s beliefs, to assess one’s emotional responses, to think on how to widen the projects and possibilities open to one.

Moreover, providing a phenomenological interpretation of education, Brook (2009) referred to five key themes that can create the opportunities for nurturing authenticity in learners: (1) planning for authenticity or the preparation for the construction of an authentic learning environment, (2) formation and dwelling as “the building of an environment in which students are given spaces to be themselves” (p. 54), (3) the formation of authentic relations whereby teachers sincerely and explicitly care about their students and consider them as subjects rather than objects, (4) the formation of questioning and thinking through which teachers ask students questions about their being and make them ask questions about their own ways of being and living, and (5) the acceptance of the plurality of expression of one’s own self and the various possibilities of students’ authentic becoming.

Furthermore, Barnett (2007) proposed a theory of authenticity. In fact, in his book *A Will to Learn*, Barnett defined authenticity as finding one’s own voice amidst surrounding voices through critical dialogue with mainstream texts and voices. Barnett also made a distinction between two types of voice in educational contexts: pedagogical and educational. By pedagogical voice, he referred to a voice that is not necessarily an authentic voice and explained that
the student may speak, but may just be going through the motions, may be evincing only what she has just heard or read. She may even have a book beside her—keeping one step ahead of the tutor—and proffers a piece of that text as her own, not having thought the matter through. So pedagogical voice is not necessarily authentic.

(p. 92)

Also, Barnett (2007) maintained that the educational voice is an authentic voice whereby each learner “is coming into herself; is realizing herself and is inserting herself into her offerings. Her utterances, her activities, her exchanges are manifestations of her voice” (p. 93). Additionally, he asserted that “in forming her educational voice, then, hard work lies ahead of the student. She has to give herself to the demands of her intellectual field(s), her curriculum, and her pedagogical situations” (p. 95). Indeed, Barnett argued that authenticity is different from the concept of autonomy. He also explained that an autonomous learner understands concepts and theories of her field, is able to confidently express her ideas and thoughts, will be heard, and will claim attention. But he indicated that an autonomous learner is not necessarily an authentic learner, because her voice may be “a recording of other voices (her parents, her culture, her peers—the ‘they’)” (p. 91).

Thus, in order to revisit authenticity in the field of TESOL, this study sought to examine English language professors’ experiences in nurturing authenticity in their learners based on the theory of authenticity proposed by Barnett (2007). In fact, we delved into our participants’ stories to see how they helped their learners form their educational or authentic voices and give themselves to the demands of their educational field, curriculum, and pedagogical situations.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

We used a modern social science hermeneutic approach, whereby the data were collected from different sources, including in-depth interviews and personal documents. Lueger and Vettori (2014) defined modern social science hermeneutics as a qualitative research method that can be used in interpreting the social meanings of actions and interactions constructing higher education. They also explained that this method is conducted in three stages:

1. text production whereby the data are collected and are transformed into texts
2. text interpretation through which the researchers reconstruct meanings and find out the latent layers of meanings by analysing the text producer’s conditions and sense-making acts
3. text transformation whereby meanings are clarified and justified for readers

By using social science hermeneutics, we aimed to identify the structures and contexts underlying subjective interpretations. Therefore, contrary to hermeneutics as a mere text interpretation, we conducted social science hermeneutics that is mainly a context analysis.

Participants and Context of the Study

In order to choose our participants, we used purposeful sampling. Our participants were 30 Iranian ELT professors (18 women and 12 men) who were selected based on their educational degree and teaching experience. First, the participants were chosen from professors with a master’s or doctoral degree in teaching English as a foreign language, because only professors with master’s or doctoral degrees have the possibility to teach at universities in Iran. Also, the participants all taught English at the undergraduate level to ELT or English literature students at state universities in different cities in Iran.

Second, the selected participants had various years of experience, ranging from 2 to 17 years. According to Ajjawi and Higgs (2007), “this diversity lends richness to the data and is a valued aspect of interpretive paradigm research” (p. 617).

Third, we selected our participants from among university ELT professors, who engaged in teaching based on the operational definition of scholarship of teaching proposed by Hubball and Burt (2008). Hubball and Burt defined scholarship of teaching as teachers’ engagement in an ongoing learning process, dissemination of research studies in peer review contexts, and development of practice-driven curricula. Consequently, we selected our participants from among university ELT professors who were active course conveners and curriculum/syllabus designers. They were also experienced in publishing in peer-reviewed journals and conducting workshops, collaborative projects, and grant writing.

Fourth, the participants were chosen from among university professors who were interested in our topic of enquiry. After identifying ELT professors with regard to their educational degrees and teaching experience, we sent an email to each professor and invited them to take part in our research study. Our letter of invitation was also accompanied by a cover letter in which we explained the purpose and the qualitative nature of our study. Also, the participants could use their own first name or pseudonyms.
Because the focus of our study was on Iranian ELT professors’ experiences in nurturing authenticity in their learners, the Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) context is also explained in this section. Addressing English instruction in Iran, Nasrollahi Shahri (2017) indicated that Iranian English learners have positive attitudes towards learning English and there are many English language institutes in Iran that focus on communicative English instruction, although Iran has been isolated from the West since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Mohammadian Haghighi and Norton (2016) hinted at the expanding value of the English language in Iran despite the existing political view, which considered English as a threat to Iranian people’s Islamic identity.

Furthermore, Iranian English language professors can be considered as nonnative English language professors. Therefore, the findings of this study can yield results in growing awareness and understanding for wider nonnative contexts. Having addressed the native–nonnative dichotomy in TESOL, Aneja (2016) asserted that the growing awareness of nonnative-English-speaking teachers can help us “move beyond attempts to categorize individuals archetypically *a priori*” (p. 590). Aneja argued that this point is highly important in TESOL, because “we can blaze a trail away from the (re)invention of (non)native speaker subjectivities and toward greater equity in the field and new and exciting ways of framing language, its users, and its use” (p. 591).

**Methods of Data Collection**

Interviews and personal documents were used as methods of data collection in this research. We conducted in-depth interviews, as the first round, and asked the participants about different aspects of their teaching experiences in nurturing authenticity in their learners. Lueger and Vettori (2014) explained that “such questions are not just directed at the data material, but at the interpretive results, aiming to constantly re-evaluate previous interpretation strands and thus screening the structurally stable ones” (p. 30).

Following that, the transcriptions and interpretations of the data gathered through the first round of interviews were sent back to the professors for cross-validation of the interpretations and in the meantime requesting their participation for the second round of interviews, that is, member-check interviews. In this phase, all participants were requested to comment on our transcriptions and interpretations. This would give them the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and thoughts. Member-checking helped us review the obtained themes extracted from the data in the first round of interviews. Some themes were collapsed into each other, and some others were discarded.
because there were not sufficient data in their support. Moreover, all participants were asked to write personal documents about their personal experiences in nurturing authenticity in their learners. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), personal documents can be any form of a first person narrative that “describes an individual’s actions, experiences, and beliefs” (p. 133).

Procedure

All participants were initially interviewed to solicit their teaching experiences. The first round of interviews commenced with introducing the topic of enquiry. After that, the participants were asked some open-ended questions about their experiences in nurturing authenticity in their learners. Some of these guiding questions are presented in Table 1.

Follow-up chats were also conducted to gather more data about any missing information. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was recorded and later transcribed. Then, the initial transcription of the first round of interviews was prepared and handed over to all participants for the purpose of member-checking (i.e., the second round of the interviews). Following that, the participants were requested to write personal documents in order to narrate their own experiences and beliefs on some important questions; prompts included the following:

- How do you help your learners assert their own voice?
- How do you help your learners recognize the voice of others?
- How do you help your learners come into dialogue with mainstream voices and texts?

Given that the ELT professor participants had a full command of English, all the interview questions and personal documents were done in English.

For the analysis of data, we capitalised on Lueger and Vettori’s (2014) interpretation process of modern social science hermeneutics based on the following six steps:

TABLE 1
Some of the Guiding Questions in the In-Depth Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Please tell us about your experience in making your learners do the following:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. contribute to the classroom activities and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. express their thoughts and ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. express their own stories and reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. get ready to open themselves to new experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. take a critical stance on the mainstream voices, texts, and conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. believe themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 1: Identification of literal meanings and contents of the texts. At this stage, we first selected each paragraph as our unit of analysis. Then, we reduced each paragraph by recapitulating the key content. Finally, we paraphrased the key contents in various ways to find out everyday meanings of the paragraph.

Step 2: Reconstruction of the participants’ subjective meanings or intentions based on the topic of enquiry. At the second stage, researchers do not seek to understand how each unit of analysis might be usually understood, but they try to understand the intended meaning. Accordingly, we sought to reconstruct the intended meaning of each paragraph based on the topic of enquiry and the main phenomena of the present study, including higher education, English language teaching, nonnativeness, and authenticity.

Step 3: Reconstruction of latent structures and meanings. At this stage, we analysed the text producers’ word choices, grammatical structures, repetitions, and generalizations.

Step 4: Reconstruction of pragmatic meanings considering the context of the study and rules governing actions and interactions. At the fourth stage, based on the findings of the previous stage, we analysed each paragraph through the lens of the context of the study (i.e., the higher education context) to find out how such norms could affect text producers’ meanings and communications.

Step 5: Construction of the preliminary themes to provide tentative explanations for our findings, which are the result of the analysis of meanings identified in the previous steps.

Step 6: Reconstruction of the final themes. Once more, we analysed the themes identified in the previous step in terms of their features and dimensions in order to reclassify them based on their fundamental characteristics and eventually reduce their number.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The analysis of the data led to three core themes: (1) critical knowledge in English language education, (2) dialectical and reflective praxis, and (3) a flexible and localised curriculum. Indeed, these core themes stood out from our data as more important and relevant concerning our topic of enquiry. We elaborate on the meaning of the extracted themes in the following section.

Critical Knowledge in English Language Education

The way our participants sought to teach their learners how to come into critical dialogue with the mainstream voices was found to
occur in three themes: becoming familiar with the mainstream knowledge in English language education, questioning the mainstream knowledge, and valuing diverse knowledges held by various groups. We put these three themes under the core theme of critical knowledge in English language education. The following examples were extracted from our data set. The first was extracted from an interview with Ali, an ELT professor with 11 years of teaching experience:

First of all, we should teach our students the important theories and methods, which are provided by authorities and famous scholars. We should make our students knowledgeable and help them acquire the necessary knowledge. I think they cannot find their own unique voice and ideas without understanding and recognizing the dominant views in their field of study.

In a similar way, Parvin, an ELT professor with 6 years of teaching experience, indicated:

I think I should first teach my students the most important theories and trends in our field of study. I do my best to make them familiar with the most important scholars. Even when my aim is creating a class where students can express their own original ideas, they should know the existing framework.

Moreover, Mohammad Hossein, an ELT professor with 9 years of teaching experience, argued:

Anyway, we are teachers and learners of the English language. So we can reach our unique understanding and perception after knowing our own field of the study. To reach our unique understanding and ideas, we should read the most important sources of knowledge.

As can be understood from these examples, the majority of our participants asserted that it is very important to teach English language learners what can be viewed as mainstream knowledge. Referring to reading sources that are written by authorities in English language education, they mainly acknowledged that ELLs should know the dominant theories and methods in English language education. In fact, they believed that it is not possible for ELLs to achieve their unique voice if they are not familiar with the basic concepts and the main theories of their field of study.

The following examples were also extracted from our data set with regard to the second subtheme: questioning the mainstream knowledge. The first example was extracted from an interview with Nasrin, an ELT professor with 3 years of teaching experience at an Iranian university. Nasrin pointed out:
It is very important to teach critical thinking skills to our students if we want them to find a critical stance toward what they receive from books, teachers, or other types of materials. We should teach them how to analyse, how to evaluate, and how to reach answers or conclusions using the existing data and sources.

In addition, Asad, as an ELT professor with 15 years of teaching experience, argued that learners should be able to criticise and challenge the mainstream texts and sources:

If I am a teacher who tries to help his students find their unique voice, I should enable them to read and know the most important and well-known theories and techniques. Then, I must teach my students this fact that they are allowed to challenge and question what they have read based on their experience, perception, and contexts.

Similarly, Dariush, an ELT professor with 2 years of teaching experience, maintained:

Each student should be allowed to analyse the papers and books written by the most important and well-known authors and researchers. By immersing into the existing points of view and then challenging them critically, the student can achieve a view point that is her own different idea.

Our participants stated that ELLs should be empowered and should be taught how to think critically. They asserted that learners cannot uncover their own voice without using a critical lens through which the received data can be examined. They claimed that only criticality can make it possible for learners to make a distinction between their own voice and what is considered as the dominant knowledge.

Furthermore, the following examples were extracted from our data set concerning valuing diverse knowledges held by various groups. In her personal document, Sara, a professor of English language with 9 years of teaching experience, indicated:

I think we can publish papers and talk about our contexts. In this way, new data can be gathered, although we (nonnative people) are of secondary importance. In this way, we can teach sources that reflect different people, different cultures, and different methods for teaching and learning language. Then, my students can find their own standpoint after examining different texts and various standpoints that belong to both native and nonnative researchers.

In a similar vein, Shahin, an English professor with 4 years of teaching experience, referred to hearing different voices in addition to the mainstream texts and voices:

I believe that each student can find her own voice by making enquiries into her discipline. Because she is an English language learner, she
should study the main texts. But theories can be modified. So I teach my learners to listen attentively to their classmates and other experienced teachers. I ask them to read texts that are written by researchers from different disciplines.

Our participants argued that ELLs can achieve their own voice when they have access to various sources written by scholars from different cultures and contexts. Addressing the distinction between native and nonnative scholars, they implied that various views and ideas should be read and valued. They also explained that learners can find their own standpoint after weighing up different views.

**Dialectical and Reflective Praxis**

The way our participants sought to teach their learners how to recognise different voices, assert their own voices, and modify various voices was found to occur in two themes: reflectivity and dialectic. In addition, the majority of our participants hinted at different activities—such as critical questioning and discussions on contextually sensitive topics by which ideas about reflectivity and dialectic could be enacted. We put these two themes under the core theme of dialectical and reflective praxis. We used the word *praxis* to hint at those processes by which dialectic and reflectivity could be realised and enacted. Furthermore, dialectic refers to arguments through which learners tried to reach an agreed-upon answer and solution while understanding and hearing different points of view. The following excerpts, which were extracted from personal documents and transcriptions of interviews, can further clarify this core theme.

The first example was extracted from an interview with Hamed, an ELT professor with 9 years of teaching experience. Hamed stated:

We should make it possible for students to express their own ideas and listen to other ideas. Discussing some controversial topics and issues that are from our own communities and our own culture can be a good activity. They can have this chance to manage disagreement, assess different views, modify their first ideas, defend themselves, reject their interlocutors’ views, and create their new idea that is more appropriate and comprehensive.

Similarly, Jafar, an ELT professor with 11 years of teaching experience, pointed out:

It is very important to teach students how to openly talk with each other about tangible topics that are about their own problems, trends, and beliefs. In this way, they learn to think critically about their own ideas and analyse other ideas. They can reflect on what they think and
why they think in a specific way. So they can develop their own ideas from among other different ideas.

The majority of our participants referred to the importance of contextually sensitive topics whereby students can appraise different ideas on a topic to achieve a more integrated solution or answer. They explained that such challenging and thought-provoking topics that are related to issues and problems of their own contexts, that is, where they live, can provide the necessary opportunity for students to argue over opposing ideas in order to reach an agreed-upon view, come into a dialectical dialogue, and reflect on contents and presumptions of their own thoughts.

Somayeh, as an ELT professor with 8 years of teaching experience, also mentioned the important role of critical questioning. In her personal document, she argued that such questions help students think and reflect on the underlying assumptions of taken-for-granted events and beliefs:

We should pave the way for students if we really want them to find their own voice from the existing books and thoughts. Critical questioning is necessary. We can ask them to create new things, justify their own positions, or analyse texts and situations. We can ask them to identify advantages and disadvantages of their own point of view and ask us questions. We should help our students start asking questions especially about issues that become normal and routine.

Similarly, Shirin, an ELT professor with 15 years of teaching experience, hinted at this issue:

Authentic student is able to stand up and ask me this question: What are these materials and why should we read them? So students should find the necessary power to ask questions about materials, contents, and reasons. I start asking questions about different aspects of our everyday life. Authenticity starts when they learn to question norms, regular patterns, and accepted assumptions.

It seems that our participants believed that critical questioning makes it possible for learners to start questioning the content, process, and premise of their learning procedure. In this way, they can ask their teachers why they teach what they teach. They may also address the methods and activities through which content and materials are taught.

A Flexible and Localised Curriculum

The way our participants sought to teach their learners how to express their own stories and reasoning, and open their own selves to new experiences, was found to occur in a core theme: a flexible and localised
This core theme referred to a curriculum that revolved around the needs of a given group of learners with regard to the decisions about the linguistic contents, classroom activities, and teacher–learner relationship. Our participants pointed out that decisions about important aspects of the overall plan of the class should be made after negotiations and dialogues with learners. Also, the majority of our participants believed that the development of learners’ authenticity requires a curriculum whereby learners’ diversity or experiences are taken into account. The following excerpts, as examples chosen from the data set, illuminate the meaning of the above-mentioned core theme. The first example was selected from an interview with Mohsen, an ELT professor with 5 years of teaching experience. Mohsen explained:

You know, the plan, which we have for our classroom activities, tasks, and materials, is very important. Our overall plan should reflect our students’ life if we really want to have authentic students, because we want to train students who can have their own perception of the world. We can emphasise those skills that are needed for our students concerning the place where they live. We can emphasise topics that are our students’ pains.

Addressing the plan for selecting contents, choosing classroom activities and tasks, and organizing relationships in the classrooms, Mohsen argued that the curriculum should be designed according to local and contextual conditions. Mahsa, an ELT professor with 11 years of teaching experience, also pointed out that students’ differences and diversities should be taken into account:

It is better to avoid a fixed plan and program, because students are different regarding their family, social status, gender, and dialects. They may be from different provinces. Iran is a great country with different cultures. So we can be flexible if want to provide such an atmosphere for them to find themselves.

Mahsa also argued:

If we want to develop our students’ authenticity, we should be able to hear each individual student’s voice. First, we should create an educational atmosphere, where our students’ differences are respected.

Akbar, an ELT professor with 5 years of teaching experience, hinted at a similar point:

We can choose to be process-oriented. If we have such a goal and want to empower our students to have their own voice, we should start our classes with negotiations and communications. In this way, students can start speaking and hearing different viewpoints. We make them decision makers and they start expressing their ideas and opinions.
Both Mahsa and Akbar pointed out that there is a strong need for an opportunity in our classes whereby learners’ differences are valued and they are considered as important decision makers. Akbar also referred to the importance of negotiations before starting our classes and making important decisions.

**INTERPRETATIONS OF FINDINGS**

Utilising Barnett’s (2007) definition of students’ authenticity, the present study sought to reconceptualise authenticity in TESOL as an authentic voice through the lens of a hermeneutic exploration of the experiences of Iranian English language professors in nurturing an authentic voice in their learners. Analysis of the data directed us towards three core themes. The first core theme was critical knowledge in English education and included three subthemes: becoming familiar with the mainstream knowledge in English language education, questioning the mainstream knowledge, and valuing diverse knowledges held by various groups, including nonnative scholars. Elaborating on the meaning of critical knowledge in a critical curriculum, Zepke (2016) referred to questioning dominant ideologies and valuing diverse standpoints held by the oppressed groups whereby students “are active members of a critical discourse community and culture that engage with mainstream knowledge but also challenge it” (p. 152).

Our participants indicated that EFL learners can find their authentic voice by making critical enquiries into the dominant knowledge of their discipline. They also pointed out that EFL learners should be empowered to contemplate and ask questions about the materials that they receive in order to find their own authentic voice. Although our participants alluded to the dominance of sources that are provided by native speakers and asserted that nonnative speakers are marginalised in English language education, they acknowledged that learners should build their own interpretation, perception, and unique voices on the dominant voices and texts.

As previously mentioned in our working definition of an authentic voice, Barnett (2007) also explained that the authentic voice accompanies other surrounding voices. Addressing the surrounding voices, he explained that an authentic voice is achieved “not in personal ‘detachment,’ but in a ‘modification’ of those voices” (p. 43). Moreover, Barnett argued that authenticity can be cultivated in students when they are taught to immerse themselves in dominant voices and come into critical dialogue with those voices. In English language education, such a definition of learner’s authenticity indicates that ELLs should immerse themselves in materials, models, and theories that are mainly...
proposed by native teachers and researchers. Hino (2018) argued that “as long as models, materials, and methodologies simply remain Anglo-American, teachers have no choice but to end up with enhancing the same old aspiration among learners toward the English of native speakers” (p. 217). Moreover, Holliday (2006) argued that the underlying theme of dominance of Anglo-American teachers, methodologies, and theories is “the ‘othering’ of students and colleagues from outside the English-speaking West according to essentialist or religious cultural stereotypes” (p. 385).

Our participants pointed out that learners should also learn to hear various voices, including the marginalised ones, if they want to search for their own unique voices. They also indicated that the cultivation of learners’ authenticity is achieved through critical dialogue with not only mainstream voices but also marginalised ones. Our participants went beyond the binary distinction between native speakers and non-native speakers. As Nonaka (2018) argued, “moving beyond such binaries may be the necessary step toward post-native-speakerism” (p. 42). According to Houghton and Hashimoto (2018), post-native-speakerism is a new trend in English language education that is characterized by the acknowledgement of contextual differences and professional qualifications, resistance to binary division based on nativity, and the desire to implement equitable practices.

Moreover, Barnett (2007) made a distinction between authenticity and knowledge. He argued that cultivating authenticity in students is more important than developing knowledge as the collectively accepted understanding of the world that is represented by mainstream voices and texts. Addressing the importance of authenticity, Barnett argued that “in relation to learning, ontology trumps epistemology. That is to say, the student’s being in the world is more important for her learning than her interests in developing knowledge and understanding in a particular field” (p. 6).

However, the findings of our study show that critical knowledge is an important component of becoming an authentic student. Also, our participants explained that critical knowledge as an effort for immersing in dominant ideologies, questioning them, and valuing various stances is the result of students’ enquiry into both mainstream voices and marginalised ones. Therefore, our participants addressed the important role of both epistemology and ontology for developing authenticity in ELLs. They also indicated that learners’ ontological or authentic voice can be cultivated as the result of the development of their epistemological voice or their search for critical knowledge.

The second core theme was dialectical and reflective praxis. This core theme addressed contextually sensitive topics and critical questioning. Our participants referred to critical questioning as an
opportunity and practice for cultivating learners’ authenticity whereby learners can critically question and reflect on taken-for-granted issues and events. Cooper (1983) highlighted the importance of reflection as a theme leading to authenticity in learners. Furthermore, Barnett (2007) argued that critical reflection makes it possible for learners to find their critical spirit whereby they can hear different voices, accept new thoughts and possibilities, examine their own status, and assert their different stance. Barnett asserted:

To be critical now is to let live. That is, it is to have the preparedness to open oneself up to frameworks that run counter to those in which one has invested one’s own pedagogical being. It is not just a matter of assimilating another theory, or another way of going on, where there are just technical differences across frameworks. It is now a matter of being, the students’ being, being capable of being other than it is and has become.

(p. 153)

Brook (2009) acknowledged that teaching can lead to becoming authentic “only insofar as teaching serves as a deconstruction of everydayness; confronting students with the preconceptions and inauthenticity of everyday life, leading the student to the question of their own being” (p. 51). But our participants hinted at the importance of critical questioning as a possibility whereby learners examine not only the underlying assumption of their everyday life, but also the content, process, and premise of their learning. Our participants addressed the possibility for learners to examine what they learn and how they learn.

As previously mentioned, our participants also referred to the importance of classroom discussion. Brook (2009) argued that discussion can provide a possibility for developing students’ authenticity because it helps teachers “build an authentic learning environment by making room for the students’ own personal questions and thoughts about what is being thought about” (pp. 54–55). Therefore, it can be concluded that students’ own questions and ideas about various issues should be expressed and heard in the English language classroom. But it should be noted that our participants mainly addressed discussions on contextually sensitive topics that can lead to dialectic, because learners can examine a familiar and contextually relevant topic from various standpoints and can weigh different perceptions and interpretations in order to reach a more integrated standpoint whereby differences and disagreements are handled. Indeed, discussions on contextually sensitive topics remind us of the importance of the contextually sensitive approach to teaching English whereby the status of local vernaculars is raised compared to inner circle Englishes and the
importance of local context is taken into account in TESOL (McNulty, 2018). Thus, it can be said that the cultivation of EFL learners’ authenticity is a step towards contextually sensitive English language teaching.

The third core theme was a flexible and localised curriculum. This core theme referred to the inclusion of learners’ diversity and experiences in a curriculum. Barnett (2007) pointed out that higher education should provide the opportunity for learners to speak out and reveal themselves even if they are marginalised. Accordingly, they can find a voice and be affirmed. More importantly, they are invited to narrate their own unique stories and reasoning. Therefore, their contributions can help them impose their own orderings on their offerings. They are empowered to come into their own selves and authentic voices. Also, decisions about classroom activities, contents, and teacher–learner relationships should be based on the needs of a given group of learners and should be made after negotiations with learners. Addressing the curriculum in higher education, Barnett and Coate (2005) argued that the curriculum in higher education in the 21st century should provide “epistemological space, practical space and ontological space—for students to be and become not just themselves but new selves” (p. 168). Elaborating on the meaning of three kinds of space, they also explained:

Space is of three kinds that parallel the three curriculum dimensions: *epistemological space* (the student widening her understanding of matters, seeing situations through a variety of frameworks); *practical space* (the student being enabled to accomplish actions in academic and nonacademic domains); *ontological space* (where the student develops her own self-awareness, self-confidence and capacities for self-critique and self-direction).

(p. 164)

Indeed, our participants regarded critical knowledge as critical enquiry into various perspectives and views on different matters. In addition, they emphasised the importance of dialectic and reflectivity as praxes for argument, self-reflection, and reflective practices on content, process, and premise. But, addressing a flexible and localised curriculum, they indicated that cultivating learners’ authenticity also requires providing a space for diversity and inclusion.

**CONCLUSION**

The current study examined higher education ELT professors in Iran with regard to their experiences in cultivating their learners’
authenticity. Our conclusions, both theoretical and empirical, are further explained below.

Our participants indicated that the cultivation of authenticity in ELLs requires a specific educational atmosphere where learners can come into a critical dialogue with both mainstream and nonmainstream voices. This finding refers to the dialogue between native and nonnative scholars in English language education. Because our participants were from Iran, a country with a collectivist culture, our findings that address dialectic, reflectivity, and critical knowledge also reveal that it is time to go beyond the dichotomy of individualist–collectivist in order to address the complexity of each unique context. According to Holliday (2015):

The diverse experience that people bring from different cultural backgrounds may contribute in a variety of ways, with the potential to change and enrich both the nature and use of English and the way in which it is taught and learnt.

(p. 21)

Furthermore, our participants hinted at some praxes, including critical questioning and discussions on culturally sensitive topics whereby learners could reflect on contents, processes, underlying assumptions, and premises of their learning procedure and everyday life. These praxes also showed that dialectic can emerge from dialogues in which interlocutors seek to appraise their different perspectives in order to reach a more meaningful and comprehensive view. Illuminating the meaning of dialectic in education, Schwarz and Baker (2016) indicated that it is the best kind of dialogue that “realises an ideal of democracy in which people create a space of dialogue within which they express their opinions, take into consideration the other and handle disagreements in reasonable ways” (p. 23). It seems that for our participants, authenticity meant finding one’s own voice amidst other voices through dialectical and reflective praxis.

In addition, our findings refer to a flexible and localised curriculum that revolved around the needs of a given group of learners. Elaborating on the meaning of process-oriented ELT curriculum, Wette (2011) explained that “in this type of course, the syllabus is produced retroactively through the methodology that results from explicit negotiations with learners about their needs and wishes” (p. 137). But our participants also indicated that a curriculum for cultivating authenticity in ELLs takes into account learners’ diversity and experiences. In fact, the findings of this study can open up new possibilities for material developers and curriculum designers in English language education. As previously explained, our participants indicated that learners
can find their voice through dialogues with both mainstream and non-mainstream voices. Thus, we can conclude that there is a strong need for materials to be written by nonnative scholars and teachers if we aim at cultivating our learners’ authenticity.

Using Barnett’s (2007) theory of authenticity can also offer a new possibility for reconceptualising authenticity in English language education. The reconceptualisation of authenticity also demonstrates that new factors should be taken into account for legitimising nonnative English teachers. Xu (2018) maintained that English is an international language for communication in various contexts and we need “a multicultural way of thinking, doing, and being” (p. 1). Based on the findings of our study, we acknowledge that the new concept of authenticity can lead to a new chapter in English language education in which local experiences and diversities are highlighted, and we have the opportunity for the multicultural way of being.

Finally, we should point out that our study was a hermeneutic study. Therefore, we think that there is a need for further qualitative studies on authenticity and nonnative-English-speaking teachers’ voices in various contexts in order to validate the themes obtained in our study. Furthermore, this study was conducted in Iran, a country in the Middle East; therefore, further studies in other countries with different mother tongues and cultures can provide new spaces for enriching our understanding of authenticity in ELLs.

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