Ethno-Linguistic Dynamics: Exploring Labeling Theory in the EFL Learning of Iranian Majority and Minority Communities from the Perspectives of EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Framed within Grounded Theory, this study explores the informal labeling of EFL students in Iranian majority and minority groups' online classes from the perspectives of teachers. It aims to understand the impacts of both positive and negative labels on students' interactional abilities and relationships within these contexts. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 EFL teachers from both Tehran and Sanandaj, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds, findings reveal contrasting approaches between teachers in the two regions. Tehran teachers are observed to cultivate a nurturing environment through the application of positive labeling, which subsequently enhances students' interactional competence. Conversely, teachers from Sanandaj tend to employ more direct and critical forms of negative labeling. The study underscores the importance of teachers' awareness of labeling theory in shaping students' reality. Pedagogical implications highlight the necessity for teachers to refrain from negative labeling, instead offering support and encouragement, thereby fostering students' positive mindset, resilience, and confidence. By enhancing teachers' understanding of labeling theory, significant improvements can be achieved in students' learning experiences, creating a more conducive environment for language acquisition and growth. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of labeling and emphasizes the vital perspective of teachers in shaping classroom dynamics and student experiences.

Keywords: Interactional Competence; Labeling Theory; Majority Ethnic Group; Minority Ethnic Group

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1. Introduction

The context in which teaching and learning take place plays a crucial role in education. Curriculum designers, teachers, and all parties involved in education are to be aware of these nuances and details if the process of learning is to flourish. In this regard, ethnic groups and their characteristics are of paramount importance (Lizotte, 2023; Uluğ & Uysal, 2023). Therefore, in order for the education system to yield appropriate results, one needs to be aware of similarities and differences among these ethnic groups in any context, and Iran is not an exception. Iran is a vast country with a wide variety of ethnic groups (Bokharaee, 2007).

Minority and majority groups are often subject to various labels, despite exhibiting similar behaviors. This is exemplified through the comparison of children from wealthy and poor backgrounds. In wealthy families, when a child tries to enter a house by climbing its wall, it would be interpreted as a part of his normal growth by its social context, but in poor families, it would be the trace of becoming a wrongdoer (Bokharaee, 2007). Thus, the concept of labeling theory has emerged as a framework to elucidate the construction of delinquency within societal perceptions of individuals who have been assigned specific labels (Lee, 2024; Matos et al., 2023).

Labels attributed to individuals typically fall into two categories: formal and informal labels (Mitchell, 2011). Formal labels are those assigned by official entities, such as the juvenile justice system, while informal labels typically arise from interactions with other members of society (Mitchell, 2011). One crucial aspect of labeling theory that is pertinent to this study is that it occurs within social interactions. Consequently, individuals function as members of society who play a role in the labeling process (Mitchell, 2011).

Language serves as the primary tool for interacting with other members of society (Rabiah, 2018), and nowadays, in the modern world, English has become one of the prominent languages for communicating with people in larger societies (Krasny et al., 2018). Young (2011) underscored the importance of interactional competence in establishing successful communication. Interactional competence refers to the ability to effectively engage in and navigate social interactions, taking into account various factors such as verbal and nonverbal communication cues. (Ockey et al., 2023; Young, 2011). Thus, developing interactional competence in language learning is essential, as it enables individuals to effectively communicate in the target language within social contexts (Ockey et al., 2023; Plough et al., 2018). The roots of a lack of support or close relationship might be linked to various sources. However, the most crucial one is related to informal labeling. Teachers can shape students' realities through their reactions to different practices in class. This is the

teacher's reaction that can provide support and induce a good relationship and rapport among EFL learners (Meskill, 2005).

There could be various reasons for a lack of support or close relationship. The most crucial one, though, has to do with informal labeling (Kim & Park, 2022; Klimecká, 2024; Lee, 2024; Matos et al., 2023). Teachers have the power to shape students' realities through their reactions to different practices in class. The action on its own bears almost no significant emotion. This is the teacher's reaction that encourages or discourages students from repeating or quitting an action (Meskill, 2005). This is the teacher's response that can encourage EFL students to build positive relationships and rapport by offering assistance (Meskill, 2005). However, few studies address this issue in the context of learning English as a foreign language. Studies on criminal and crime-related topics comprise the majority of the research (Meskill, 2005). Accordingly, this study aims to highlight the informal labeling of majority and minority ethnic groups in the context of foreign language learning in Iran. Due to the geographical location of Iran, there are different ethnicities in this country that have their own specific languages or dialects (Amanollahi, 2005). Despite the fact that Iran is a multiethnic country, there is a general tendency among all to learn English (Irajzad et al., 2017). Social factors, including cultural background, have an impact on English learning and vary among Iranian ethnic groups (Soltani, 2014). Thus, it could be worthwhile to explore additional social factors that could affect EFL learning in these ethnic groups. To this end, this study aimed at exploring the major informal labels assigned to EFL students in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' perspectives. Moreover, it examined the impacts of positive and negative labels on the students' interactional abilities and interpersonal relationships.

In an attempt to gain new insight into the impact of positive and negative labeling on the language learning and interactional abilities of EFL learners regarding Iranian EFL learning contexts with ethnical differences, the following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What are the major informal labels assigned to students in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' perspectives?

2. To what extent does informal labeling affect the interactional abilities of students in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' perspectives?

3. How do positive and negative labels influence the students' interpersonal relationships in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' perspectives?

4. How does the role of informal labeling work differently in both majority and minority students' learning in online classes from teachers' perspectives?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Labeling Theory

Teachers exert a significant influence on the behaviors, self-perceptions, and social interactions of students by virtue of the labels they assign to them (Klimecká, 2024). To delve into labeling theory, first the concept of the "self" must be explained (Kim, 2022). The self is an independent character distinct from other characters; it is not a physiological entity; rather, it emerges via social interactions with other members of society. Language is another crucial component in this process (Kim, 2022; Klimecká, 2024).

In their explanation of labeling theory, Kim (2022) used the phrase "dramatization of evil" to refer to the issue of delinquency and explain how labels assigned to deviants lead to crimes. Since labeling theory is very stringent, ignores the role of the perpetrator as an active agent with free will, and places all the blame on labelers, it cannot explain the origins of crimes (Barmaki, 2019). However, labeling theory has become influential in other fields of study, particularly in language learning contexts (Thompson, 2014). Rist (2014), for the first time, studied the role of labeling theory directly at schools and at its micro-level. He believed that labeling learners as bright or low will affect their processes of understanding or even their future, and he suggested that labeling theory must be studied in different aspects of education (Rist, 2014).

Labeling has a profound impact on an individual's perspective toward life (Ahuvia et al., 2024; Glickman, 2022). Labeling allows individuals to perceive and understand the world in different ways. Students are continuously developing to higher levels and grades and shaping their realities through different classes and teachers. Teacher evaluations and labels often influence students' feelings (Glickman, 2022). Unfortunately, these labels inevitably accompany students throughout their education, which makes it hard to change those beliefs. This can lead students to fail to achieve their full potential or self-actualization. This is due to the fact that some students believe what they hear is not really desirable. Thus, they might develop the idea that they always get poor results. Teachers might change their students' ideologies by labeling them (Ahuvia et al., 2024).

Labeling theory includes the Pygmalion effect (Thompson, 2014). The Pygmalion effect states that a student's performance may be influenced by their teacher's attitude toward them (Thompson, 2014). Besides, Lopes et al. (2012)

noted that there is an interest in examining the whole issue of formal labeling and investigating the influences of labeling on normal people or non-criminals, and this highlights the issue of labeling more intensely, explaining that labeling could lead to delinquency not just on criminals but on anyone who receives a negative label. They added that negative experiences and labels such as arrest may have a profound indirect influence on individuals, particularly adolescents, and might have negative outcomes later in their lives (Lopes et al., 2012).

On the other hand, informal labeling often occurs in society and has a psychological impact on one's attitude toward themselves that may affect their future (Mitchell, 2011). If an individual receives a label from other normal members of society without any special rank or status, that label might be classified as informal labeling (Kavish et al., 2016). It is clearly stated that parents and the immediate environment of an individual are the primary sources of this type of label that might have a profound effect on someone's self-concept or self-esteem (Cook, 2016). Individuals usually develop their ideology and knowledge through their interaction, observation, and imitation, and one of the most important issues they acquire is their self-concept, which is regarded as an integral facet of labeling theory (Cook, 2016).

2.2. Interactional Competence

Interactional Competence (IC) refers to individuals' abilities to deploy interactional resources, namely, turn-taking, boundaries, repair, and speech acts, through available linguistic resources as required by the speakers and hearers to express their communicative intentions in actual situational contexts (Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild, 2023; Duxbury & Haynie, 2020; Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Gokturk & Chukharev, 2024). Hall et al. (2011) considered interactional competence as a fundamental issue in studying second language learning. Individuals are members of a social community, and through interaction, they are seeking meaningful social action (Hall et al., 2011). In order to meet this purpose, some abilities are required: First, knowledge of social context; second, being acquainted with typical goals and conventional behaviors of that society; third, recognizing the context-specific pattern for conversations; fourth, familiarizing oneself with nonverbal actions in the society to take turns correctly based on the conventions of that context; and finally, overcoming challenges during interactions (Hall et al., 2011).

2.3. Ethnicity

Ethnicity is defined as the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a "people" (Brass, 2023; Heath et al., 2023). Esman and Rabinovich (2019) maintained that there are certain ethnic groups in many places that could be majority or minority and dominant or

subordinate. Ethnic groups may resemble permanent or temporary residents of a place. An ethnic group can be distinguished by some shared features that make them distinctive from neighboring groups. Thus, an ethnic group is a classification of individuals who identify each other according to shared characteristics and attributes that particularly distinguish this population from others, for instance, by a common set of traditions, language, or culture (Esman & Rabinovich, 2019). Ethnicity can be an inherited characteristic based on race or society. The emergence of the concept of minority traces back to examining differences that were common among different groups of people as nations (Brass, 2023).

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Context of the Study

To meet the requirements of this study, a total of 23 female and male EFL teachers from Tehran and Sanandaj (majority and minority ethnic groups) were selected. Since the study was conducted based on the principle of grounded theory, the participants were selected according to theoretical sampling, which identifies different manifestations of a theoretical construct like labeling in this study (Butler et al., 2018). The researchers sampled participants based on whether or not they represented an important theoretical or operational construct. The participants had five years of face-to-face teaching experience and at least one year of online teaching experience. Since older teachers were not familiar with online techniques for teaching and younger teachers did not have enough experience needed for this study, the age of the participants was designated between 23 and 40. Further, the study began with a few participants, and the data reached saturation with 12 from the majority and 11 from minority ethnic groups. They were interviewed based on the objectives of the study. The grounded theory approach in this study is Straussian, and in this type of approach, the researchers are allowed to face the theory by applying some structured questions. The participants were selected deliberately from among those teachers who had online teaching experience for almost a year to meet the requirements of the online teaching process. For considering the ethnicity criterion, half of the participants were from the Kurdish context as a sample of minorities, and half of them were from Tehran province for Persian group as a sample of majorities. In addition, in order to eliminate the effect of gender on the findings, participants were equally divided into females and males for both groups. It is worth noting that the study was conducted in the Summer of 2023 in Iranian language schools.

3.2 Instruments

In this qualitative study, three instruments were employed: semi-structured, focused group, and narrative interviews.

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interview

A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that permits interviews to be focused while still giving the interviewer the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview. In other words, it involves asking interviewees a set of open-ended questions and following them up with probe questions to explore further their response and the topic of interest (Adeoye Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 EFL teachers from Tehran and 11 teachers from Sanandaj to explore their viewpoints toward labeling and its impact on the students' interactional abilities. The interviews were conducted through Skype and phone calls, and each interview session took about 20-30 minutes. For all research questions, a set of related interview questions was designed by the researchers, and the items were reexamined by five language experts in terms of the appropriacy of the language, content relevance, and content coverage using Likert scales. The final draft, which was confirmed in terms of content and language and administered among the participants, included 10 items. (See the Appendix for the complete interview protocol.)

3.3.2 Focused Group Interview

A focused group interview is an interview a researcher conducts with a group of participants to collect a variety of information in qualitative research (Rabiee, 2004). One distinctive feature of this study is that it examines some differences considering the research questions in two various ethnic groups. Thus, to prevent certain problems regarding ethnicity, such as bias or subjectivity, focused group interviews were conducted with two ethnic groups separately.

3.3.3 Narrative Interview

A narrative interview consists of the researcher asking an open-ended question that invites the interviewee to respond in a narrative form by retelling experiences of events as they happened (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). A narrative interview was conducted to collect data about labeling theory and generate a new theory in this study. In this case, the interviewers used particular techniques, like storytelling, to elicit each participant's significant and experienced events, considering the aim of the study.

3.4. Procedure

In this study, the researchers also followed a semi-structured interview protocol and asked more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewees rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format. Afterward, the transcribed texts were entered into MAXQDA software for categorizing the data. Then, through the process of coding, the researchers interviewed as many teachers with assigned features as needed to reach the level of saturation. The interviews were conducted through Skype to record the whole video call, but the duration of the interview was not set and depended on participants' answers. In order to reach the aim of all research questions and collect the data with high credibility, triangulation of the data was done through three different types of interviews. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to reach the general theory of existing labeling theory in a language-learning context. Then, a narrative interview was conducted to explore teachers' viewpoints. Finally, a focused group interview was conducted to differentiate between the two groups of minority and majority. Trustworthiness is a critical issue in this study. To meet credibility standards, peer review was done, and the members of the qualitative research team checked this study in terms of bias and honesty. Moreover, the researchers checked the answers with participants one more time to assure the credibility of the results. Besides, a code-recode strategy, which is an intra-rater assessment, was also used to reach dependability. After coding the data, they were put aside for a while and then recoded by the researchers.

3.5. Design

The research design selected for this qualitative study is grounded theory. According to Ary et al. (2018), grounded theory is a type of qualitative study in which the emphasis is on finding a theory. The root of this study goes back to sociology and labeling theory, which have been generated in the social justice area. The study aims to bring this theory into the learning environment and observe how it works in different ethnic contexts. To this end, teachers from two different ethnic groups were interviewed in order to reach a general theory for labeling in education.

3.6 Data Analysis

Raw data moved to the interpretation and explanation phases in order to answer the research questions. After data collection, similar units of meaning were classified in MAXQDA software. Then, through inductive coding, the researchers generated the general theoretical statement. The procedure for analyzing data was conducted through different levels of coding that exist in the Straussian approach. Thus, coding data was broken down into small segments, and for each segment, a specific label was assigned. The next stage was axial coding. The researchers determined the relationships among labeled segments

and categorized them based on their similarities. In this stage, the researchers put the data together, determining the main categories and their sub-categories as well as the connections between a category and its sub-categories. The last stage was selective coding. In this stage, the researchers reviewed the related categorized data systematically in order to reach the general theory. In this regard, the researchers applied the constant comparative method for analyzing data and compared all units of meaning to find similarities and omit differences to build a general framework for the study. The constant comparative method is a process used in grounded theory, where the researchers sort and organize excerpts of raw data into groups according to attributes and organize those groups in a structured way to formulate a new theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Due to the nature of the data, an iterative cycle of data collection and analysis was followed in such a way that the researchers frequently conducted interviews, transcribed the verbatim, and compared the transcript with the previous transcripts to check whether new categories emerged or not. Besides, to have a sense of the conformability of the interview data, they were weighed against the transcripts of journal writings. The data collected from the interviews was directly transcribed in order to avoid any bias. After transcribing the interviews, the researchers gradually got acquainted with the data through reading and rereading the transcriptions. Next, they made some notes as a preliminary step to provide a coding scheme. Next, the raw data were codified to develop concepts and themes from the data using the constant comparative method and the coding paradigms of the grounded theory approach, that is, open, axil, and selective coding (Ary et al., 2018). The participants' sentences were selected as the basic unit of meaning. The units with the same coding were put together to form categories that were 1 level above the codes in open or preliminary coding. The researchers detected a wide range of concepts and categories regarding the challenging factors, which were reduced later. Next, the researchers attempted to develop the core categories by generating connections among the different subcategories by applying axial coding.

Furthermore, two experts in qualitative data analysis checked the validity of the processes and the congruence between the participants' views regarding the data coding and categorization procedures. To assure the validity of their results, half of the semi-structured interviews and focused group interview data were coded by the researchers. They agreed on the trustworthiness of the steps taken for data analysis by 90%. Besides, data triangulation was followed by employing three instruments.

4. Results

4.1 Results of Research Questions

The results from interviews were transcribed and coded into different categories, which showed interesting issues regarding labeling theory and ethnic groups' language learning considering informal labeling in the interactional competence of ethnic majority and minority groups in Iranian online classes. The results, along with some supporting excerpts, are presented in the following.

4.1.1 Research Findings for Major Informal Labels (Question 1)

The first research question of the study aimed at exploring the major informal labels assigned to students in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' perspectives while they were learning English in an online environment. Regarding the present question, the following categories emerged from semi-structured, focused group, and narrative interviews.

Table 1

Informal Labeling Categories Emerged

Categories
1. Titles (Mr., Miss., Dr., First Name., etc.)
2. Compliments on appearance
3. Feedback on homework

4.1.1.1 Change in Judgment System

Many EFL teachers in Tehran noted that they call middle-aged individuals "doctors" regardless of job, gender, or status. They believed that doing so would assist learners in learning better and develop a rapport between teacher and students. On the other hand, they maintained that calling learners "students" could have consequences. If students feel the teacher is not their friend, they will ask the institute to change the teacher, which is a very negative point for the teacher. In addition, all ladies, married or not, would prefer to be called "miss," and it was done so by all teachers in Tehran. On the other hand, teachers in Sanandaj called everybody's last name if they were teenagers or younger, and they added "Mr. or Ms." for adults. The following interview statements demonstrated these points:

Teacher 3 (semi-structured interview): Everything depends on the area that you teach. Sa'adat Abad and Jordan districts are totally different from Nezam Abad. People here (Sa'adat Abad and Jordan districts) are so sensitive. We cannot just call them everything we want. I myself remember teaching at an

institute in our city, Shiraz. That was the beginning of my career, and I could call students everything that I wanted. However, it is totally different here. Students feel better when I call them "doctors". The point is that if you don't call them something that they want, they will go to the manager and they will ask to change the teacher.

Teacher 5 (Focused Group): In Tehran, teachers must do whatever their students desire. Here, we call all female students "miss," even if they are married. I mean, this is not a bad thing. It will have a good effect on students, but when they force you to call them "miss," it won't give you a good feeling.

Teacher 1 (semi-structured interview): I believe that everything is different for the upper class. I started my job here, I mean in the north of Tehran in a luxurious neighborhood. And it had a profound effect on my teaching. It is not really possible to call everybody by their last name without a title.

The findings revealed that the majority group teachers tried their best to develop a good rapport through different means, such as using appropriate titles and positive sentences.

4.1.1.2 Compliments on Appearance

The majority of the interviewees believed that compliments in an appropriate context could induce positive feelings. Many of them pointed out that human beings need to be emotionally satisfied in order to learn better. They put under the spotlight the significance of positive energy and motivation as well. This might be because of the sense of satisfaction, which is a basic human need. Generally, students find it enjoyable to hear their teachers' compliments. This is closely linked to the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the students. These are evident in the following interview excerpts:

Teacher 9 (semi-structured interview): Compliments are nice. However, I think I need to be careful to complement my students because most of them are girls and women. You know that it is really difficult to compliment somebody because other students might be jealous or they might not like it. I remember once our language school manager was criticized for complimenting one of my female students.

Teacher 14 (focused group): I am totally against complementing students. They will experience less facilitative stress. I mean, a little stress in class is healthy. Keeping students on the edge will help them learn better.

4.1.1.3 Feedback on Homework

Most of the teachers believed that they must provide constructive feedback on their students' homework to help them explore their strengths and weaknesses. The point about feedback is that in Tehran, the majority of teachers tended to give positive feedback to students and somehow sugarcoated the negative feedback. However, teachers' feedback in Sanandaj was quite negative. Concerning this, the interviewees pointed out that:

Teacher 1 (focused group): I usually give positive feedback to my students, and even if I want to give negative feedback, I try to use indirect methods of correcting them.

Teacher 19 (semi-structured interview): I have read something about feedback, but I think those rules and principles are for other countries. Here in Sanandaj, I must be direct in my feedback. Students like a dominant teacher. They won't improve themselves if they don't feel a bit anxious! I mean, it is even better to inject a little stress into their EFL learning atmosphere!

As indicated by the participants, the EFL teachers labeled students differently. 90% of the participants in Tehran reported that they used positive words to describe people's appearance, homework, or punctuality. However, in Sanandaj, only 10% of the participants had the same idea. The rest of the participants in Sanandaj, that is, 90% of them, believed that they should not get close to the students by labeling them positively or by any other means.

4.1.2. Research Findings for the Effects of Informal Labeling on Interactional Abilities (Question 2*)*

Labeling theory addresses the bases for discrimination and differentiation between groups. Regarding the present question, the following categories have emerged from semi-structured and narrative interviews.

Table 2

Social identity categories emerged

Categories
1. Listening to students
2. Managing and changing topics

4.1.2.1 Listening to Students

Many of the interviewees in Tehran believed that teachers should hear their EFL learners' voices even when they talk about irrelevant issues. However, teachers in Sanandaj felt free to interrupt the students whenever it was irrelevant. The following excerpts revealed this:

Teacher 7 (focused group): If I listen to my students, it just makes them realize that they are valued. This is part of my educational etiquette. I've been trained in a way that I should listen to whatever my students say.

Teacher 3 (semi-structured interview): My students are never allowed to discuss irrelevant issues in my classes, even with their classmates.

The above excerpts revealed some facts regarding informal labeling and how it affects the interactional abilities of students in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' viewpoints. Both the semi-structured interviews and narrative interviews repeatedly pointed out various types of issues regarding the amount of time allocated to students to be heard. The majority of the teachers in Tehran (up to 80%) believed that their students must be given the appropriate amount of time and attention in a way that induces a good feeling in them. On the other hand, teachers in Sanandaj believed (up to 70%) that students must be directly interrupted if they mention something irrelevant.

4.1.2.2 Managing, Changing, and Choosing Topics

One interesting point that caught the attention of the researchers was the way teachers and students managed and changed topics. The majority of teachers in Tehran highlighted the importance of equal rights to take turns and start a conversation between the teacher and students. However, the conversation was more of a one-sided interaction in Sanandaj, meaning students were not allowed to choose and talk about a topic on their own. They must follow the lead of the teacher. This is evident in the following extracts:

Teacher 5 (semi-structured interview): In my classes, I always mention that we are all here to learn together, and I'm not superior to you. My students and I are equal. I give them the opportunity to talk about their emotions. I see them as my friends. Everybody must be given a turn to talk.

Teacher 12 (Focused Group): There is no need to discuss irrelevant topics in my classes. My students can check on their problems with our language school manager or supervisor outside the class.

The results revealed some interesting and thought-provoking notions regarding interviewees' attitudes toward managing, changing, and choosing

topics. The majority of teachers in Tehran, 90%, hold the belief that they must give students a turn to talk, or the opportunity to choose a topic. That is, the teachers in Tehran believed that democracy must be served in their classes. On the other hand, teachers in Sanandaj believed that teachers might lose control over their classes if their students had the chance to choose a topic.

4.1.3 Research Findings for the Effects of Positive and Negative Labels on Students' Interpersonal Relationships (Question 3)

Regarding the third question, the following categories emerged from transcribing and categorizing semi-structured interviews and narrative interviews.

Table 3

Informal Labeling in Interpersonal Relationships

Categories
1. Close vs. distant
2. Positive Face vs. Negative Face

4.1.3.1 Close vs. Distant

An interesting point that was revealed regarding informal labeling in EFL learning for majority and minority students in online classes was the support provided by the teacher. The participants from Tehran underscored the significance of building rapport with their students. The following excerpts elucidate these points:

Teacher 10 (Narrative Interview): Developing a good relationship is our job, without which we cannot survive. Teaching is an interpersonal matter. I must have a good relationship, by any means. Using positive words to encourage them is absolutely essential. I sometimes call them smart or creative. It gives them a good feeling.

Teacher 17 (semi-structured interview): Well, I believe that having close relationships with students and calling them by their first names leads to delinquency.

The results from the interviews showed that EFL teachers in the majority ethnic group developed a good relationship with learners, while this was not the case in the minority ethnic group. That is to say, EFL teachers of the majority

ethnic group believed a good rapport contributed to higher outcomes in education, whereas teachers in the minority ethnic group believed the opposite, explaining that close relationships lead to disorganization and delinquency.

4.1.3.2 Positive Face vs. Negative Face

The second issue regarding informal labeling in the learning of majority and minority students in online classes is the positive versus negative face of the teacher. In this respect, the interviewees provided these statements:

Teacher 9 (semi-structured interview): We should teach in a way that they don't get offended. One of the ways that I can implement this is through a positive attitude. I often show that we are connected and use the pronoun "we" rather than you.

Teacher 20 (Focused Group Interview): The best way is to call students by their last names. We need to show the difference. I am the teacher, and they are the students. This distinction must be crystal clear to them.

The results illustrated that the majority of the teachers in Tehran (80%) hold the belief that they must have a very close relationship with the students. That is, the teachers in Tehran believed that having a good relationship was the core value of their business. On the other hand, teachers in Sanandaj believed that they must keep their distance and not get close to the students. They clearly draw the line between being a teacher and being a student.

4.1.4 Research Findings for the Role of Informal Labeling in Learning (Question 4)

In this section, the data analysis for the fourth question of the study spotlights the role of informal labeling and its difference in the EFL learning of both majority and minority students. Regarding this research question, the following categories emerged from transcribing and categorizing interviews.

Table 4

Informal Labeling in Learning

Categories
1. Support
2. Confidence-provoking environment

4.1.4.1 Support

The support provided by the teacher is an eye-catching point that was revealed regarding informal labeling in EFL learning for majority and minority students in online classes. The following interview excerpts elucidate this point:

Teacher 11 (narrative interviews): I usually start my class really energetically, try to support my students by all means, and assist them in solving their problems.

Teacher 13 (Focused Group): I've been told I shouldn't handshake with my students. I've been told not to get too close to my students because I wouldn't be able to control the class. And they are right. I, myself, have experienced this. When you become a friend, they won't listen to you, and they think that it's cool.

As it is clear from the presented excerpts, support is readily available for students in Tehran, or, better to say, for the majority group. That is, teachers try to support students by all means. However, it is not the same for the minority group. Teachers tended to be more direct or harsh in treating learners in the context of minority students. This may have a profound effect on students' general concepts of the classroom and learning.

4.1.4.2 Confidence-Provoking Environment

In the previous section, it was revealed that support can help students have a better and more pleasant English learning experience. In this part, a more detailed look at the issue illustrates some interesting points about confidence and the impact of labeling on confidence. In this section, the newly emerged category (informal labeling in a confidence-provoking environment) will be addressed. The interviews from Tehran underscored the importance of trust and noted that trust significantly promotes students' learning. The following comments demonstrate this:

Teacher 5 (focused group): I always address my students' needs, trust them, and try to provide a dedicated environment to develop their confidence. Moreover, I often call my students dear. Sometimes I indirectly call them friends and assure them that there won't be any problem if they make any mistakes.

Teacher 20 (semi-structured interview): Actually, I don't let my students express their feelings in the classroom environment. Since some of them are too rude, I cannot trust them at all.

These findings indicated that teachers in Tehran supported students by different means, including labeling them positively. This might lead to a more

positive classroom experience for both students and teachers. On the other hand, most teachers in Sanandaj believed that labeling students positively or supporting them would lead to disorganization in class. Further, labeling negatively was referred to directly or indirectly in some of the participants' responses in Sanandaj. The findings illustrated that teachers in Sanandaj did not trust students or let them express themselves. This is why the relationship between teachers and students was obviously colder in Sanandaj.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to gain new insight into the impact of positive and negative labeling on the language learning and interactional abilities of EFL learners regarding Iranian EFL learning contexts with ethnical differences. As a result of conducting this study, the researchers discovered that, according to the EFL teachers' perceptions in Tehran, giving compliments might lead to a better interpersonal relationship between teacher and students, provide a less stressful environment, and increase students' self-confidence. In the same vein, Burnett and Mandel (2010) put under the spotlight the significance of complimenting students and pointed out that praising students may increase motivation, boost good feelings, establish rapport, and encourage them to perform better in the classroom.

The interviewees' perceptions toward using titles to address their students in the classroom revealed that this issue was of concern for 90% of the majority ethnic group teachers in Tehran. However, minority ethnic group teachers in Sanandaj tended to call their students just by their last names. Moreover, minority group teachers in Sanandaj stated that certain amounts of stress during classes can lead to better learning. All of the teachers in the minority group simply assumed that if they developed a better relationship with students, they would lose control over the class. On the other hand, the results revealed that teachers in Tehran developed a better rapport and positive relationship with their students, and it is worth noting that their students felt less anxious and were more willing to communicate in the classroom. In line with these findings, Bhatti et al. (2020) demonstrated that building good relationships and rapport with students would lead to a better learning environment. These findings are illustrated in the literature by some scholars (Huth & Betz, 2019; Ngo et al., 2019; Van Dijk, 2019). For instance, Ngo et al. (2019) noted that labeling individuals differently leads to their conceptualization of reality, upon which they will act. When an individual undergoes a new situation, they find themselves in a barrage of reactions that shape their realities. Positive labeling contributes to positive emotion in individuals in general and in students and language learners in particular (Ngo et al., 2019).

In contrast, the minority teachers in Sanandaj underscored the importance of focusing on their students' learning and maintained that complimenting students might lead to disorganization in class. Besides, they noted that when a student is praised too often, it may cause them to become less motivated to continue working hard. They may feel that they have already achieved success and that there is no need to put in any more effort. In line with this finding, Seevers et al. (2014) pointed out that if compliments and praise are used too much within the classroom, they can become ineffective and superfluous, particularly if they are given sparingly during the semester. Further, compliments may cause unhealthy relationships between students and promote negative competitiveness in the classroom (Seevers et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, the interviewees' statements revealed that 70 percent of majority ethnic group teachers in Tehran considered listening to learners as an important factor in providing a supportive environment, and it is worth noting that their general policy in the institute forces this issue. Majority group teachers' perceptions indicated that listening to students contributes to academic performance and effective learning. Such findings emanate from the fact that in Iranian EFL contexts, teachers are required to foster positive relationships with their students to create classroom environments more conducive to learning and meet their students' academic, developmental, and emotional needs. In like manner, Can Daşkın (2015) stated that the opportunity to speak can contribute to more output, higher levels of fluency, motivation, and interactional competence.

On the contrary, EFL teachers of the majority ethnic group pointed out that they often tolerate students who express something irrelevant. On the contrary, asking irrelevant questions and expressing irrelevant comments are not tolerated by the minority ethnic group in Sanandaj. In this regard, Whittaker (2012) maintained that for effective learning to occur, it is crucial that students have certain opportunities to ask their questions in the classroom.

EFL teachers in the minority ethnic group in Sanandaj demonstrated that their language school's policies forced them to establish their boundaries and make their students respect them. Further, it should be noted that minority group teachers considered communicating with their students on social media too risky. On the other hand, teachers in the majority ethnic group in Tehran highlighted the importance of interactional competence and trust. Further, they asserted that being friends with their students may have a positive impact on them, and it might also make students less nervous about voicing their attitudes and concerns. In the same vein, Larenas et al. (2015) noted that a positive class environment and the consequent better social interactions may develop students' affective well-being and self-esteem and might lead to better emotional health and lower anxiety levels.

Further, EFL teachers in the majority group demonstrated that supportive context and good friendships might boost wellbeing and morale. In contrast, EFL teachers of the minority group underscored the significance of respecting their authority and maintaining a healthy distance between students and teachers. In this regard, they asserted that if their students see them as friends, this might ruin their relationship. In the same line, Kim (2022) noted that teachers are expected to highlight the importance of distinguishing teacher pedagogical authority from teacher authority as power dominance. Besides, they are required to employ their authority to monitor and lead classroom talk (Kim, 2022).

Teachers in the minority ethnic group stated that they prefer to maintain an appropriate professional distance from their students when those students encounter personal problems or crises that appear to be interfering with their learning in the classroom. This may also be owing to the fact that teachers might not have been trained appropriately to deal with their students' issues, and they may not know professional standards and ethics for becoming involved in students' personal problems. Regarding positive and negative faces, 70 percent of the interviewees in the majority ethnic group pointed out that a positive face can lead to a better rapport between the teacher and students. In the same vein, Halim (2015) illustrated that a positive face might encourage social interaction, minimize anxiety, increase student participation, and foster a positive learning environment.

Support and a confidence-provoking environment were the issues regarding the last question in the study. In this regard, teachers in the minority ethnic group in Sanandaj asserted that teacher-student friendship lowers students' respect for their teacher. On the contrary, 8 out of 10 interviewees in the majority ethnic group believed that supporting students through various practices could lead to better interpersonal relationships. In the same vein, Peng and Fu (2021) underscored the importance of providing opportunities to improve students' social skills and giving them a voice and choice to develop their confidence. When students feel their opinions matter, they are more confident and motivated to share during class discussions (Peng & Fu, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The current study illuminated the major informal labels assigned to EFL students in minority and majority groups in online classes from teachers' perspectives. Moreover, it explored the impacts of positive and negative labels on the students' interactional abilities and interpersonal relationships. In accordance with the findings of the study, the majority group teachers in Tehran put under the spotlight the significance of labeling their students positively and developing a better interpersonal relationship with them to enhance their

interactional competence and decrease their anxiety in the classroom. Further, the majority group teachers in Tehran demonstrated that rapport and closer relationships with their students develop various classroom areas, specifically motivation, feedback, student learning, communication, and well-being. Moreover, they pointed out that harsh feedback might lead to long-term negative effects on students' motivation, performance, and mental health. However, the minority ethnic group teachers in Sanandaj illustrated that building rapport might lead to over-identification with students, making it challenging to maintain professional boundaries in the classroom. Furthermore, the majority group teachers in Tehran maintained that complimenting students was in line with developing a good rapport with them. In contrast, due to negative labeling in the minority group teachers in Sanandaj were reluctant to compliment their students and stated that praising students might lead to disorganization in class.

Furthermore, positive teacher and student relationships may promote various aspects of students' academic success. Positive relationships in EFL classes are critical to students' success and are built based on understanding, empathy, and open communication. When students feel supported, they are more likely to engage in learning and have better academic outcomes. Thus, students need to feel that their teachers hear their voices and respect their needs, attitudes, and interests. Besides, when students have positive interactions with teachers, they might have fewer behavioral problems. It is worth noting that, in this study, the teachers in the majority group supported their students by all means. Moreover, positive face in the majority group classes led to rapport and positive relationships between teachers and students.

The results of this study provide some pedagogical implications that can be of benefit to Iranian EFL teachers, educators, students, educational stakeholders, curriculum designers, and material developers. Fostering teachers' awareness of labeling theory plays a critical role in shaping students' reality in EFL classes, and it influences the way in which their students cope with their challenges in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, there should be specific formal training opportunities for teachers. Moreover, most teachers in Iranian language schools do not have the freedom to design a syllabus or develop material for their classes. This research might enhance their awareness of labeling and its consequences to be used when appropriate. Further, materials developers and textbook writers are expected to prioritize equality in developing materials.

To sum up, the current study faced certain limitations and delimitations, which need to be taken into account in interpreting the findings. The first limitation of this study concerns the number of participants. Thus, future studies can include more participants to yield more generalizable results. Besides, the participants had various cultural, economic, social, and family backgrounds. It

was time-consuming and tough to select more homogeneous participants in terms of the aforementioned factors. Since the scope of the study is confined to EFL settings and other language teaching environments are inaccessible, the study restrictions are superimposed by generalizability issues. Moreover, the study calls for further investigation, considering the differences in gender and academic degree. Ultimately, since there are numerous ethnic groups and it seems improbable to include all of them in the study, the majority group, which is Persian, and one of the minorities, which is Kurdish, have been taken into account. Thus, future studies could include other minorities that exist in Iran.

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Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How do you usually call or label your students in the classroom? Do you use any titles? How do you call or label them if they make a mistake?

2. What is your attitude toward complimenting students?

3. How do you give feedback to your students?

4. How much time do you allocate to your students?

5. Do you let your students change topics in the classroom?

6. What is your attitude toward the relationship between teacher and students? Do you think teachers and students should be friends?

7. How close or intimate do you think teachers should get to their students?

8. How do you direct your students' actions in class through labeling?

9. How and to what extent do you support your students through labeling?

10. Is it important to induce specific emotions in students by labeling them?

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