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Crisis-prompted online language teaching: a qualitative inquiry into autonomy among teachers in refugee settings

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Abstract

Language is central to issues of displacement and education. This paper examines how English language teachers in refugee settings negotiated and exercised autonomy in teaching and learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws on the notion of autonomy and its dynamics in language classrooms in refugee settings. The paper focuses on one displacement context – Jordan's refugee settings – to offer a fine-grained analysis of teachers' accounts to synthesise how teachers negotiated the transition to online teaching and developed practices and relations across different sites. The study recognises teachers' rights in contributing their own experience and expertise and draws on the Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation Research (PEER) methodology, which involved working closely with a group of six language teachers as peer researchers, who conducted in-depth interviews with two of their peers. The analysis examines the ways in which autonomy was exercised, mobilised, resourced, constrained and shaped by contextual factors during the pandemic and thus provides a nuanced understanding of teachers' experiences. The study points to the importance of understanding teacher autonomy in the context of language teaching in technology-poor environments. By providing critical insights into the dynamics of teacher autonomy in unique professional settings, it contributes to the broader discourse on digital language learning and agency, roles and skills needed by teachers to support crisis preparedness for the future.

Keywords: refugee settings; Jordan; English language learning; COVID-19; autonomy; PEER methodology

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant changes in the use of technology in educational settings, and at the same time it exerted considerable pressure on educational systems and teachers who were inadequately prepared and ill-equipped to deal with changing pedagogical practices or may have been unsure about the consequences the online pivot had for their students. The pandemic revealed an unprecedented reliance on internet-connected digital devices, which resulted in exclusion, staggering inequality and inadvertent harm (West, 2023). The situation was exacerbated in education in contexts of forced displacement (henceforth, "refugee settings") where teachers at all levels face multiple and interconnected systemic inequalities (see Greaves, Nabhani & Bahous, 2021; Pherali & Mendenhall, 2023). Government responses worldwide varied, and reaching displaced students was complex. Most students and teachers in refugee settings had no prior experience in teaching and learning online. During this time, teachers played a critical role in supporting the continuation of learning during school and university closures (Hure & Taylor, 2023). The importance of this cannot be overstated, as access and participation in education becomes more salient in displacement where education is seen as supporting hope, personal and collective aspirations, and livelihoods. In this paper, we focus on experiences stemming from language teaching and learning in refugee settings during the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of "a crisis within a crisis" and the response to this, which primarily involved moving language instruction partially or fully online.

Teachers in refugee settings are often refugees themselves. They face immense personal and professional challenges and risks while living and working in contexts where there are tensions, constraints, and complexities. They often fulfil multiple roles within and beyond the classroom (Henderson, 2023) while navigating politically fragile environments (Fox, Baker, Charitonos, Jack & Moser-Mercer, 2020). Although they find value and meaning in teaching refugee students (Tsiaousi & Chiou, 2024), they experience an "ongoing liminal state" (Keser Ozmantar, Cin & Mkwananzi, 2023: 337): a tension between not being recognised as a professional teacher due to being labelled a "refugee" or a "refugee teacher" with no clarity whether this state is constant or transitional (Keser Ozmantar *et al.*, 2023). What is more, teachers in refugee settings are often rendered as less agentic actors who are disempowered or silenced under the hegemonic power relations with their host community (Keser Ozmantar *et al.*, 2023). They are regularly treated as "passive system inputs" (Bengtsson, 2023, para. 1) and not seen as professionals in their own right.

To probe such tensions, we begin by pointing out that, despite numerous challenges, teachers in such contexts can exhibit a high degree of expertise and autonomy in and outside their classroom. Autonomy is, in fact, seen to flourish in some quite restricted contexts (Cappellini, Lewis & Rivens Mompean, 2017), is context-specific (Little & Thorne, 2017), and operates across a range of modalities, such as location, formality, pedagogy and locus of control (Benson, 2011). We draw on the concept of autonomy as a lens that helps us understand how teachers may actively exercise awareness and control in their pedagogical practices in English language teaching and how such understanding may help identify the learning dynamics and mechanisms to shape the development of teacher autonomy in refugee settings. We look at refugee settings as a unique context of learning, with high levels of instability, uncertainty, and major constraints (e.g. mobility, lack of technology infrastructure) and we apply the concept of autonomy in an empirical investigation of how several teachers based in Jordan's refugee settings grappled with the COVID-19 crisis. In our study, we recognise teachers' rights in contributing their own experiences during the pandemic-driven education response and in engaging in research that explores how everyday work was reconfigured in response to the pandemic. The main aim of the paper is to examine how teachers in refugee settings exercised and maintained their autonomy in language teaching during the transition from face-to-face to online learning. Building on this, another aim is to consider how such an understanding may support educators, researchers and education officers to exercise agency in designing language learning and teaching in technology-poor environments and in anticipation of new crises that may come.

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To meet these aims, the paper focuses on one displacement context through the experiences of teachers in Jordan's refugee settings. It focuses on tertiary education to provide empirically based research on teacher autonomy and thus contributes to a limited but growing area of research. The paper provides a synthesis of narratives from teachers through four cases to highlight their experiences as they negotiated their participation in technology-poor spaces, developed practices and relations across different sites, and built up their ability to learn and work online. The main contribution is the articulation of forms of autonomy based on these narratives and offering insights that, as Goertler and Gleason (2024) argue, may help to "build on the innovations and experiences of those who lived through the challenges of the pandemic years" (p. 11) to support emergency preparedness for the future. While these insights are specific to the Jordanian context, we note that many of the findings align with research in the field (see, e.g., Fuchs, Hauck & Dooly, 2021; Goertler & Gleason, 2024).

We first provide a brief overview of the concept of teacher autonomy before reviewing studies concerning English language learning and teaching in refugee settings and describing the methodological approach followed in the study.

2. The concept of teacher autonomy

At the centre of this paper is the notion of autonomy, which has often been associated with individuals taking responsibility and being in control of their own lives (Feinberg, 1989). Autonomy, however, is not solely an attribute of individuals but is rather shaped and negotiated within social contexts and relationships, and agents can act autonomously even without full control over the basic direction of their lives (Meyers, 1987). For autonomy to be realised, individuals must recognise their potential agency, acknowledge the possibility for improvement in their conditions, envision how change can occur, and self-reflect (Crittenden, 1993; Manicas, 1998). Agency, as Biesta and Tedder (2007) write, is "not some kind of 'power' that individuals possess and can utilise in any situation they encounter. Agency should rather be understood as something that has to be *achieved* in and through engagement with particular temporal-relational contexts-for-action" (p. 136; emphasis in original). In other words, agency is not a "trait", an individual capability, or a set of autonomous actions of an individual actor; instead, it is viewed as "socially shared, culturally, historically and socially shaped, and provided through mediational means" (Hökkä, Eteläpelto & Rasku-Puttonen, 2012: 86). Building on this perspective, in this paper autonomy is seen as a dynamic and multifaceted construct, and teachers are viewed as active agents who can create autonomous actions (e.g. take initiative and responsibility, use discretion, proactively make decisions) by critically negotiating and evaluating the social structures that surround them (Khalil, 2018; Khalil & Lewis, 2019).

The idea that teachers should develop capabilities for autonomous action, which would as a result support learners and the learning process, has formed an important tradition in Western societies (e.g. Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2009). The concepts and principles associated with teacher autonomy have been foregrounded in a range of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) applications and research projects over the years (see, e.g., Cappellini *et al.*, 2017; Fuchs *et al.*, 2021). Technology is viewed as having the potential to facilitate many aspects of autonomous learning, for example, by providing access to resources that could be used in language learning or by facilitating learner and teacher choices (Reinders, 2018) and interactions over geographical distances and time zones (O'Dowd, 2018). Studies also illustrate conflicts that teachers experience and a degree of resistance to the changes required of them, which affect innovation (White, 2007). Tensions are further noted between the ways in which teachers are prepared to exercise their autonomy in technology-mediated environments and the principles of learner-centred language pedagogies (Reinders & White, 2016). Many studies published in this area review developments in technology that introduced new ways for learners and teachers to

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access increasingly technology-rich environments for language learning. Such technological advancements rightly deserve attention. However, digital inequalities and digital poverty are growing (e.g. The British Academy, 2022); hence in this paper we argue that we need to rethink our understanding of teacher autonomy in the context of technology-poor language learning environments, as these are relatively underexplored. We take the view, in line with Little and Thorne (2017), that autonomy manifests itself in different ways in different environments, and that investigations into language learner and teacher autonomy are context-dependent.

Here we note a seemingly paradoxical situation associated with autonomy and teaching in refugee settings. Despite the dominant narrative that forcibly displaced people are always "on the move", it is highly likely that they will face a so-called "protracted displacement" situation, meaning that beyond the initial emergency phase, there are no solutions for the future (Loescher & Milner, 2009). Displaced people often spend several years or even decades in camp-like settlements, which impose significant restrictions on movement, access to work, health services and education. This dimension may seem at odds with the notion of autonomy, as there is an underlying assumption that the various restrictions may substantially limit teachers' autonomous action. Although the effects of structural factors and conditions shape individual and social action, we maintain a perspective that understands individuals "as being embedded in and imbued by their socio-cultural contexts; however, they are not seen as passive carriers of their contextual conditions, but rather as capable of transforming these conditions" (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013: 47). From this perspective, considerations of autonomy and agency are interlinked, where agency, as noted earlier, is understood as the capacity for action through interaction with social and material conditions, both individually and collectively (Ecclestone *et al.*, 2009).

Within their occupation, teachers in refugee settings, as in other educational systems worldwide, initiate and design tasks, develop teaching materials, make pedagogic choices and decisions, and so on. Autonomy, in this sense, "is part of everyone's lived experience" (Little, 2007: 3), although they may not be consciously aware of it. This paper is concerned with teachers who are seen as exercising autonomy, but they also found themselves facing the need to develop their digital skills, use digital platforms, and engage in synchronous interaction via videoconferencing software, such as Zoom and MS Teams, to maintain continuity of language teaching and learning – with little or no formal training or institutional support, and in severely constrained workplace contexts. It explores how this situation can be described using the concept of autonomy and focuses on teachers' personal accounts to conceptualise autonomy as emerging and developing in a complex relationship with language pedagogies and competencies, material environments and digital systems.

In the next section, we review studies concerning English language learning and teaching in refugee settings, focusing on tertiary education.

3. English language teaching and learning in refugee settings

Displaced people have diverse and complex language histories (Sowton, 2019), but they commonly experience linguistic isolation in host countries where they may not know the language and have few opportunities to speak their own language. Reddick and Chopra (2023) argued that refugee young peoples' linguistic aspirations and experiences connect to three key needs in exile: the need for opportunity, for connection, and for stable roots. English is seen as directly serving such needs, and thus remains the dominant language that displaced people want to learn (Sowton, 2019).

The literature includes studies on innovative practices in English language teaching and learning. An example is a study on tertiary English language faculty in Thailand during COVID-19 (Thumvichit, 2021). The study explored teachers' adaptations of curriculum and

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pedagogy for the online modality and their engagement in "trial-and-error" practices, such as posting video lectures for language practice followed by group chats for questions and answers or replacing asynchronous work with virtual group work. Teachers' "trial-and-error" efforts were seen as enhancing their ability to innovate and meet student needs. Another example involves Syrian refugee English language teachers in non-formal settings in Lebanon (Karam, Kibler & Yoder, 2017), where teachers adapted a rigid English curriculum and rote learning methods with communicative approaches. This encouraged student creativity and action and boosted teachers' motivation.

However, the literature often highlights challenges associated with English language learning, including lack of resources, inadequate teacher education, limited professional development (PD) opportunities, and insufficient institutional support. PD needs for English language teachers is a consistent theme across the literature. In exploring the perspectives of Jordanian English language teachers of refugees, Alrawashdeh and Kunt (2022) found that 53% of participants reported gaps in the training, particularly related to culturally responsive pedagogic practices. In the same geographic context, Canals and Al-Rawashdeh's (2019) study showed that PD available to university English language teachers focused on developing the technical skills needed and not on pedagogic approaches to teaching English with technology. This may explain why teachers feel challenged when their face-to-face methods are not transitioning well to virtual settings, leading to a choice of methods that are not pedagogically sound (Thumvichit, 2021). Participation in PD programmes is viewed as enhancing teachers' motivation and confidence and their ability to support students. Such findings were reported by Mendenhall, Skinner, Collas and French (2018) and Motteram, Dawson and Al-Masri (2020) in their studies on supporting language teacher development using WhatsApp in the Kakuma refugee camp (Kenya) and the Zataari refugee camp (Jordan), respectively. In Mendenhall *et al.*'s (2018) study, in-person training workshops, peer coaching, and mobile mentoring using WhatsApp were offered to teachers, who reported benefits from the connection and the support of mentors, as well as from the exchange of educational resources and teaching strategies. Peer learning as a form of PD is also reported by Thumvichit (2021), where collaborative relationships with colleagues (e.g. group chats) helped teachers navigate and implement changes in curriculum and pedagogy more effectively.

4. PEER methodology

The study drew on the Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) method (Norman, Hemmings, Hussein, & Otoo-Oyortey, 2009; Price & Hawkins, 2002), which involves participatory and qualitative research that captures the voices and lived experiences of members of the target community, in this case English language teachers in refugee settings. PEER is based upon training members of the target community and working closely with them as peer researchers to undertake in-depth qualitative interviews with peers identified from their professional networks. This was deemed a suitable approach because of those teachers' strong contextual understanding and their ability to generate evidence by starting from a place of shared identity, trust, and connection within their communities.

4.1 Process, participants and training

4.1.1 Peer researchers

The study was a collaboration between the Open University UK (OU), Mosaik Education (UK-based charity), and Centreity Systems Ltd (US-based organisation). At the time of the study, Mosaik and Centreity were offering educational programmes in Jordan. Using purposive sampling, a cohort of six teachers was recruited and trained as peer researchers (October 2021 to February 2022). The peer researchers were two men and four women with one to six years of teaching experience. Three were refugees (two Syrian, one Sudanese) and three were Jordanians. They were all teaching in English language programmes in Jordan or had taken part in a training

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programme offered by Mosaik and Centreity the year prior to this study. Financial compensation was offered to the peer researchers in line with local rates agreed with Mosaik. The study received a favourable response from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee.

4.1.2 Training workshops

The project team held three initial online training workshops (two hours each). The workshops were organised around the following topics: (1) project overview, aims, and methods; (2) discussion around key issues of concern among peer researchers around English language teaching; (3) review, refinement, and practice of a set of interview questions/prompts (developed in an earlier phase of this project; see Charitonos *et al*., 2023), such as testing different ways to raise the same issue with different interviewees; (4) practical aspects of planning, organising, and conducting interviews; and (5) ethics and safeguarding issues.

The four topics that were considered most pertinent to explore in the study were role of the teacher in refugee settings, pedagogic (communicative) approaches to English language teaching, implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for teaching and learning, and teacher PD. Against each of these topics, three to four questions/prompts were drafted to assist the peer researchers to initiate conversations with peers and to follow-up on key issues (as in Price & Hawkins, 2002) (e.g. Q. Example of an activity you did in the classroom to encourage communication and interaction among students; Q. What did you do when COVID-19 hit and you had to move your teaching online? Q. What were the challenges you faced when you had to move your teaching online [and examples]?).

4.1.3 Data collection and informants

Following these initial workshops, each peer researcher was paired with a designated member of the project team (authors Charitonos, Ross, Bonfini-Hotlosz, and Aristorenas) for support and guidance throughout the data collection process. The peer researchers were asked to identify and interview two other teachers selected from their professional network ("informants") (Peer Researcher 4 met one informant). The main criteria were for informants to be English language teachers, teaching displaced people in tertiary or higher education, and motivated to participate in this research. The peer researchers together with their interviewees could choose to conduct interviews in person or online and in either English or Arabic. The only requirement was to meet their informant twice to build rapport and cover two topics per meeting.

The only demographics collected were gender, years of teaching experience and refugee status. Of the 11 teachers who took part in the interviews, five were females and six males, with two to 22 years of teaching experience. Of these, four were refugees, six Jordanians and one migrant. Interviews took place in person and in English, but peer researchers reported that Arabic terms were drawn upon when needed. Across both meetings, the duration was between 65 minutes and 105 minutes.

A key aim in the interviews was to generate narratives around common practices and stories that circulate within communities, including narratives of the transition to emergency remote teaching. As with other researchers who used the peer approach (Norman *et al*., 2009; Price & Hawkins, 2002), we did not require the peer researchers to audio record interviews or generate extensive conversational narratives or qualitative research data. This was to mitigate any risks of feeling discomfort in their meetings with their colleagues and/or overwhelmed by the process, given they were all working in parallel with this study. The prompts/questions drafted were designed to assist the peer researchers to record phrases, practices, and/or examples given most importance by the informants. The peer researchers were encouraged to take notes (e.g. keywords, phrases) on a sheet, and indeed all of them recorded brief notes during the interviews and brought these sheets to the debrief meetings with their designated researcher (see below). They were also encouraged (as included in the initial training) to repeat responses verbatim and confirm with interviewees that the recorded notes/phrases/examples captured the key points in their narratives.

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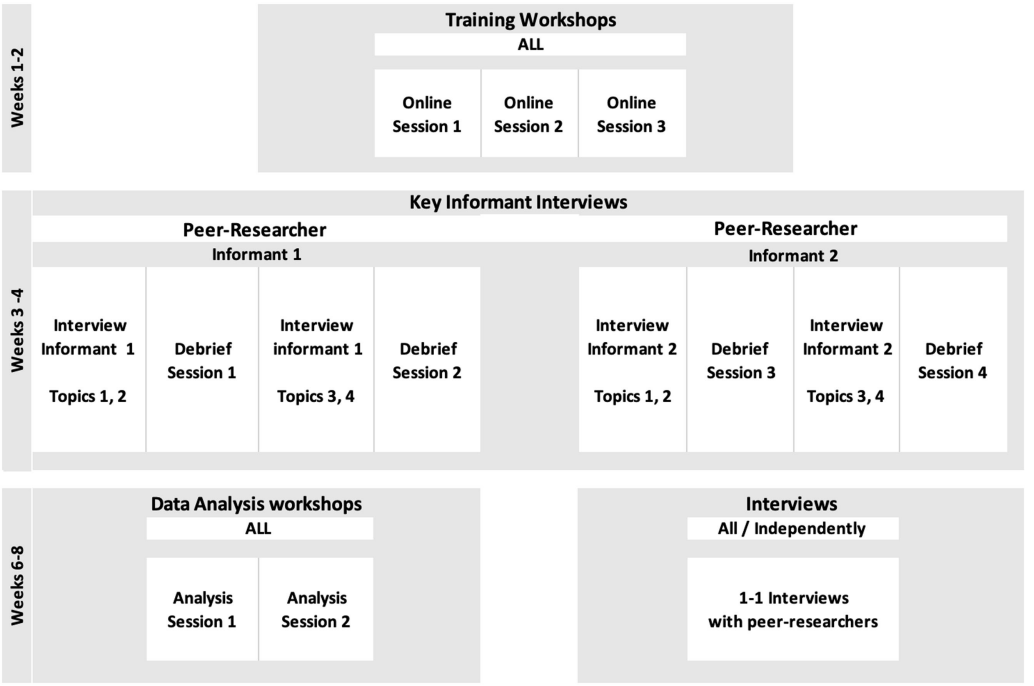

Figure 1. Data collection process.

As soon as they completed an interview with an informant, the peer researchers had a debriefing with their designated researcher (the same day or the next). These sessions aimed to review and discuss the data generated and, importantly, to provide ongoing support to the peer researchers in the data collection process. In these meetings, the researcher reviewed each question/prompt, providing peer researchers an opportunity to reflect on responses gathered and offer their own explanation and discuss concerns or issues from the interview. A "Debrief Grid" form for each informant was developed by the research team to aid this process and systematically capture the data. The form recorded key information (e.g. dates, duration, language used) and featured a three-column grid: (1) questions/prompts, (2) responses by informant, and (3) additional comments by peer researchers. The grid was filled with textual notes (in English) by each researcher during the debrief meetings. Due to these meetings being held online (on Zoom or MS Teams), screens were shared so the peer researchers could review and confirm the captured information. All debrief sessions were audio-recorded. Each peer researcher had four debrief sessions (Peer Researcher 4 – two) (total $n = 22$; duration between 30 minutes to an hour each).

The interviews and debrief sessions took place over a period between one to six weeks after the initial training workshops. Figure 1 presents the process followed against an indicative timeline (eight-week period) and reflects one peer researcher.

4.1.4 Data analysis

Following the peer interviews, two final online workshops (two hours each) were organised that involved the peer researchers working with the project team on the preliminary analysis of the data. Anonymised grid forms were shared with the peer researchers prior to the first workshop. The project team selected two such grids, asking the peer researchers (in two groups) to review these independently and come to the first workshop prepared to discuss key insights, notable points or any tensions in the data. In these sessions, peer researchers undertook a series of sorting

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and coding exercises using sticky notes and told stories that had been told to them by informants. These workshops (and the debrief sessions previously) allowed the peer researchers to contribute by checking and commenting on the data or interpretations. As Iivari (2018) suggests, such participatory interpretive research techniques position informants [peer researchers] "as co-analysts and co-interpreters to make sense of both their organizational realities and researchers' interpretations of those realities" (p. 111).

The data presentation that follows amounts to what could be considered as our "meta-analysis", in which we have drawn on the informant and peer researchers' narratives as our primary ethnographic data. In undertaking our analysis, we complemented these narratives with participant observation that we carried out in the training sessions (including peer researchers' reflections) and supervision/debrief sessions. It is not in the scope of the paper to analyse the one-to-one interviews with the six peer researchers, which took place upon completion of research activities (average duration: 57 minutes) (see Figure 1).

While the PEER approach provides rich and valuable insights through its deep engagement with community members, there are some limitations. One is related to the reliance on peer researchers' notes and recollections of the interview. However, this was deliberate to foster more open and trust-based dialogues in sensitive contexts and support the peer researchers in the process. Trust was key in this process, and any risks were mitigated through timely, regular and rigorous debriefing sessions, a systematic way of capturing data, and collaborative analysis. Furthermore, the use of a small sample might seem to constrain the generalisability of the findings. Small samples are common in research in refugee settings, with a small sample size strategically chosen to capture the depth and complexity of experiences unique to those in refugee contexts and also for us as a research team to adequately support the peer researchers and manage the intensity that the approach entailed. The insights gained are likely to resonate with educators in similar settings and can inform practices in other contexts.

5. Locating and identifying autonomy in the data

In this paper, we present four out of eleven individual cases that illustrate the varied and complex nature of teachers' lived experiences related to the challenges they encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and how autonomy was negotiated and exercised in each of these cases. The cases were selected by considering the informants' profiles (Jordanians/refugees, years of experience, teaching in camps/community centres/urban environment, gender). They are representative of the fluidity inherent within the landscape of teaching English in refugee settings. Despite our aim to focus on tertiary/university education, we came to a realisation that a few informants were concurrently teaching across a range of settings and across ages. Working in multiple jobs is common in refugee settings and is a result of the precarity of their profession and for reasons associated with their livelihoods. We recognise that teachers' narratives might have been reflective of those concurrent experiences. In the analysis of interview data, there were instances where it was not always possible to separate whether examples were associated with teaching at tertiary or K–12 levels. We, however, decided to retain such insights from teachers with such diverse experiences and some are included in the cases below (see, e.g., Khalid), because these were instrumental in enriching our understanding of the complexities and exigencies associated with teaching English in refugee settings and offered valuable information into the context and teacher motivations that are complementary to tertiary-level language instruction approaches.

In our analysis we sought evidence of autonomy in the data, particularly instances where teachers appeared to (a) create spaces for collaboration, (b) take initiative and responsibility, (c) use discretion, and (d) proactively make decisions (see Khalil, 2018). These were (non-exclusive) categories we mapped data against, and they informed the themes used below to structure the case presentation.

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Table 1. Autonomy at different levels of teachers' practices and learning before and during COVID-19

Levels	Teacher in refugee settings before COVID-19	Teacher in refugee settings during COVID-19
Individual/Personal level	Highly motivated to support students Recognition of importance of English language in students' livelihood Often concurrent work across settings and age groups. Teaching – predominantly face to face Attending professional development that teachers identified (at a cost)	Highly motivated to support students Externally imposed pivot. Use of own devices/equipment Loss of work because organisations/ programmes stopped operations Private online tutoring to students abroad No physical access to most community settings
Organisational level (community centre, university, college, public organisation)	Little training offered by organisations Access to resources/materials (e.g. printers, stationery, physical space)	Limited resources to learn how to engage properly with online learning Predominant absence of tech equipment for teaching. Evidence of one organisation buying equipment for students COVID-19 restrictions affecting provision in camps – programmes terminated School-wide WhatsApp group for mental support and communication among teachers
Community level	Students as a resource (e.g. choice of topics, planning of lessons) Colleagues as a resource (e.g. limited evidence of teachers delivering training to other teachers and of shared lesson plans) NGOs/refugee camp committees/ international organisations as a resource (e.g. providing teaching materials, curriculum plans, training) Wider communities as a resource for learning (e.g. with colleagues met in training)	WhatsApp groups with students and with teachers Facebook use with students Drawing on internet resources (e.g. videos, Kahoot games) and wider online communities (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook) Drawing on freely available and popular videoconferencing tools (e.g. Zoom platform) Educational lessons broadcast by Jordanian government on national TV

Beyond this, autonomy was also seen as taking place at both the individual/personal and community levels and in connection not only to the teachers' roles within their workplace/ organisation but also as being embedded and influenced by the wider spaces and contexts, including relations to and within the material world (e.g. technologies). These signify "[each teacher's] multi-level relations with the world" (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013: 54). In our examination, our analytic attention was placed on both understanding situations where teachers individually exercise autonomy and the material, social and cultural structures and resources for exercising autonomy, as evident in the data. Table 1 provides an overview of key elements identified in the analysis across the data generated by informants.

Next we move on to synthesise and present the four cases (names pseudonymised), drawing on extracts generated in the informant interviews.

6. Data analysis and discussion

6.1 About the teachers

Laila is a young Jordanian teacher, deeply committed to serving refugees at a community centre in Jordan. She completed her university degree in 2019. Following her graduation, she took up teaching and has experience of teaching both refugee and Jordanian students.

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Rana is a young teacher working in a refugee setting in Amman. She studied Spanish and English at the University of Jordan and worked as a private tutor during her studies. After graduation, she volunteered to teach English to refugees. At the camp, Rana received training from the refugee camp committee.

Khalid, originally from Jordan, has 22 years of teaching experience. He has worked with adults in a refugee centre in Jordan for nearly two years and has substantial experience teaching refugees in public and private schools. During the pandemic, Khalid was teaching in both a private school and a community centre. He views teachers as not only conveyors of knowledge but also helpers and friends to their students.

Mariam is a young Palestinian who has worked for 10 years as an English language teacher in a refugee camp in Northern Jordan. She is a refugee herself, and she grew up in the same camp where she is now teaching. She said that "being a refugee myself, I take pride in teaching those [students] so they can succeed in their careers and become what they dream of one day".

6.2 Creating spaces aligned with linguistic and emotional needs of students

In their interviews, teachers reported employing adaptive and empathetic teaching approaches, which seemed to be influenced by their ability to understand both the linguistic and emotional needs of their students, as well as the contextual challenges they faced before and during the pandemic.

In her interview, Laila said that she initially approached her role as a teacher with a sense of distance, adhering to traditional models of "a teacher", where she refrained from interfering too much in her students' lives. Through her capacity for evaluating the social structures she works within and the students' needs, she was quick to realise she "should be more like their friend". This realisation was crystallised during the pandemic, and she was able to change her approach. In her interview, technology appeared to play a critical role in supporting her students. She shared examples where she followed up with her students to check on them by creating WhatsApp groups. This integration of technology not only facilitated communication but also fostered a more personal and supportive rapport between Laila and her students: "there was a teacher–student relationship that developed over text" and this, according to her, had the profound impact of building genuine connections with her students. She also used a WhatsApp group for the students to record snippets of conversations of them practising English with each other.

The insights Rana shared shed light on the crucial aspect of how teachers in refugee settings navigate the socio-emotional barriers to language learning as well as negative perceptions of the English language among their students. Despite teachers recognising the importance of English in maximising their students' future opportunities (e.g. becoming employable), they felt that past experiences in learning English shape students' perceptions. This may be related to a tendency towards a "formal" language teaching pedagogy even in informal settings, with lessons focusing on the grammar and writing (Sowton, 2019). This is in addition to an observed reluctance to engage in multilingual and translanguaging practices, which creates an environment with lack of tolerance towards other languages that students speak (e.g. mother tongue) (Sowton, 2019). In her interview, Rana mentioned that her students call English a "monster". This underscores the magnitude of their challenges and the deep-seated fear or aversion towards language learning among students. In response to such views, Rana described that she chose to adopt a patient and incremental approach to introducing English, recognising the need to rebuild students' trust and confidence gradually. During the pandemic, she creatively integrated student interests and needs into the learning process by organising competitions based on the topics studied. By doing so, Rana tapped into the students' playful spirit and not only encouraged active participation and enthusiasm for learning but also helped them overcome their initial reluctance towards English.

Khalid's priorities were the use of English as the primary language of instruction and responding to his students' interests in choices of topics to use in lessons. This points to his ability

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to make pedagogical decisions that he believed were most effective for his students' language acquisition. However, Khalid was also willing to adjust his approach by occasionally switching to Arabic for clarification, showcasing his responsiveness to his students' linguistic needs. He demonstrated a keen awareness of the motivations of his students, who felt that learning the English language was obligatory. To address this challenge, Khalid integrated videos into his lessons. Multimedia resources helped him deepen his students' understanding of the English language and grammar and encouraged the use of the target language in the classroom.

The cases above suggest that these teachers, both before and during the pandemic, would adapt their approaches to cater for both the linguistic and emotional needs of their students. Such an observation resonates with the principles of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), which emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning. By recognising the needs of their students and by taking their own needs into consideration, these teachers exhibited a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between student needs, instructional practices, and the surrounding context, ultimately adapting their teaching practices to respond to such needs and prioritising social and emotional learning (SEL) alongside linguistic abilities. In refugee settings, SEL is important in helping young people to overcome the challenges of displacement and disruption to their lives (Block, Cross, Riggs & Gibbs, 2014). The data above suggest that teachers recognise that their students need academic learning, but also that students are multidimensional and that the contexts of their lives are important to address to improve academic success (OECD, 2019). For the interviewees, students' emotions were not seen as a barrier, and although their students' diverse academic needs can challenge and overwhelm teachers, the data generated do not point to teachers expressing such feelings. There were examples to suggest that teachers considered options (i.e. staying in touch through WhatsApp, use of Facebook, Zoom), which showed their willingness to create/engage in new spaces and take initiatives to continue their teaching.

6.3 Navigating or negotiating cultural and social dynamics

The narratives suggest that teachers exercised autonomy by navigating cultural nuances in their teaching. For instance, Laila understood gender dynamics when teaching English, noting that her preference was to include mixed-gender paired activities in her classroom. She identified that in such situations "students were more formal with each other", thus using English more actively among themselves. Eventually, however, she learnt not to run activities in the classroom "with the opposite sex" because she observed that students refrained from such interactions unless specific permissions were granted by the female students' brothers. This cultural constraint led her to opt for same-sex activities to navigate the situation effectively. At the same time, Laila was aware of the vital role of oracy in language learning: "it's about talking. You need to let the students talk and practise the language using talking inside and outside the class". To facilitate this, as already discussed in the previous section, she created a WhatsApp group with her students that provided a platform to record snippets of conversation to practise English with each other outside of class.

The COVID-19 outbreak introduced new cultural considerations, particularly regarding the use of cameras during online learning sessions. Laila observed that some of her students were hesitant to turn on their cameras, noting that "their parents do not want images of the home being displayed on the camera". Using her discretion, she gave students the choice of using cameras, respecting their individual circumstances. Meanwhile, Laila made a conscious decision to keep her camera on to foster a sense of connection and engagement among students. This adaptive approach showcases Laila's awareness of the sensitivities to cultural dynamics, further observing that her students were less anxious about making mistakes in the foreign language when they were off-camera. As she explained, "in the [community] centre, students would see each other and be shy from making mistakes. Online, they don't turn on the camera, and they feel okay with making mistakes".

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Another example is Khalid's intentional choice of religion, sports, and politics as topics in his lessons, pointing to his awareness of the cultural dynamics within the classroom. The topics were deeply meaningful and held cultural relevance to his students' lives. Khalid aimed to foster a learning environment that aligned with, and valued, their cultural identities and experiences. His intentional approach, as Khalid mentioned in his interview, not only enriched the learning experience by making it more relatable to students but also fostered a culturally responsive learning environment that catered to their needs and backgrounds. Valuing his students' backgrounds, Khalid makes pedagogical designs that do not "ignore" them in the name of assimilation in the Jordanian context. He instead leveraged them as a resource, benefitting student academic outcomes and their social and emotional well-being.

A final example comes from Mariam, who teaches English in a Palestinian camp. At the outbreak of COVID-19, Mariam looked for the online spaces where her students already "hang out" to use those same platforms for teaching. She created a Facebook group "to carve out an educational space for [her] students" and felt "fortunate that most of the [students] from [her] class were on that Facebook group". She mentioned high levels of stress she had at the beginning of the pandemic: "from where to start and how am I going to be able to reach out to my students?" She noted student gratitude in transferring their online experience to a Facebook group. She appreciated her organisation's support and mentioned a school-wide WhatsApp group where "from the administration to the heads and on to the teachers – we were all mentally supporting each other through WhatsApp".

Mariam explained that she tried to use all available resources at her disposal to secure continuation of her teaching but many of her students came from very poor families who relied on government aid and lacked connectivity and equipment at home. The strict camp lockdown policy, enforced by the police, prevented those students from going to another place or visiting their peers to access online lessons. "Unfortunately, those [students] had their education paused during COVID," she said. Mariam exercised autonomy both personally and organisationally, and to some extent navigated the dynamics and experiences her students had on social media platforms. However, the camp situation left her feeling powerless to solve the issues faced by students excluded from new teaching spaces.

The social and cultural nuances highlighted in these examples might have hindered teachers' exercise of autonomy. However, as highlighted by Meyers (1987) and Biesta and Tedder (2007), teachers are still able to act autonomously without having control over some of the basic directions of their professional lives. They do so through their capacity for self-reflection about their social context and critically evaluating the norms and standards of that context (Crittenden, 1993). Through this capacity, these teachers could create spaces for autonomous action.

6.4 Navigating professional challenges and making informed choices

Navigating professional challenges and making informed choices was integral to teachers' roles in refugee contexts. Rana's experience exemplifies these challenges and choices as she confronted the daunting task of adapting to unfamiliar online conferencing platforms during the pandemic. To adapt to this new educational landscape, she took proactive steps to engage with online resources and platforms to support her understanding in using them effectively. By using self-directed learning resources such as on YouTube, she acquired the necessary skills to facilitate effective emergency remote instruction with her students. Similarly, Mariam referred to "look[ing] for new workshops to attend or [. . .] opening YouTube to get inspired with new methods". Despite the initial challenges, both teachers' willingness to embrace innovative approaches reflects a powerful demonstration of autonomy as they navigated the evolving demands of education amidst unprecedented circumstances.

Similarly, Khalid faced challenges in the private school where he initially taught during the pandemic. Complaints from parents and a broken laptop left him feeling unable to meet the

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diverse needs and expectations in the school. He stressed in the interview that "every teacher needs to have equipment – the physical things – not just data". He lost his employment, which led to considerable self-doubt, but Khalid then considered alternative avenues where his skills and expertise could perhaps be better utilised and appreciated. This decision-making process highlights how he navigated professional challenges and made informed decisions aligned with his values. He leveraged his skills to secure employment and PD along with private virtual lessons for students both within and outside Jordan. Reflecting on his experience, Khalid appears to have sought to regain a sense of autonomy and explored environments where he could thrive and contribute to the community.

Another example came from Laila, who faced difficulties garnering parents' support and ensuring student engagement. She used various strategies to overcome these obstacles. By learning to incorporate interactive games and technology into her lessons, she captured her students' attention and fostered enthusiasm for learning. In the beginning, her students were not aware of online etiquette and behaviour and "were loud", so she "had to mute them at first". She also utilised communication tools such as WhatsApp to directly engage with her students and provide timely reminders and updates about lessons. Notably, Laila also referred to challenges she faced in her own home due to her mother's concerns "about using the room [to teach] [. . .] she would be actively teaching and making a lot of sound which would disturb others who might be sleeping".

The narratives of interviewees illustrate the myriad challenges encountered by teachers in refugee contexts during the pandemic, including limited resources, loss of employment, lack of parental support, and stressful teaching arrangements from home. Teachers felt stretched during COVID-19, a situation they felt was complex and characterised by a lack of resources. There is a discrepancy here: the workplace context (organisational level in Table 1) required teachers to work online and to continue their practice and teaching, but it offered only limited resources for them to practise their profession adequately.

Laila commented that "in the beginning it was chaos", despite working in an organisation that was the only one (among participants' organisations) that supported purchases of equipment and data for their students. Mariam referred to five students using the same phone in turns, so it took time to get responses from those students. Both Rana and Khalid had to resort to online private tutoring during the pandemic because the programmes run by their organisations were terminated and could not be resumed online due to some students not having access to smartphones or laptops. The teaching and learning spaces that the teachers created with their students were abruptly suspended and it was beyond their control to sustain them. Rana's and Khalid's narratives reflect few or no resources for working as a teacher online at the organisational level and affected the extent to which teachers could exercise autonomy. Still, their ability to draw from their own personal connections and wider communities online (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook) to become self-employed as online tutors (in Jordan and abroad) offers evidence of exercising autonomy and problem-solving at the individual/personal level.

Instead of being deterred by these challenges, teachers demonstrated proactive agency and acknowledged their constraints. Deci and Ryan (2012) emphasised the importance of understanding the boundaries imposed by one's social context for the exercise of autonomy. However, awareness of these constraints is not sufficient for the exercise of autonomy, as highlighted by Khalil and Lewis (2019). The data suggest that the four teachers not only recognised these constraints but also actively sought opportunities for professional growth and improvement in educational outcomes for their students.

7. Concluding remarks

This paper focuses on the emergency shift to online learning following the outbreak of COVID-19 and makes an important empirically informed practical contribution to the literature by

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synthesising narratives and offering an improved understanding of English language teachers' strategies and responses during the pandemic and how these could be mapped against the notion of "autonomy". By examining the experiences of English language teachers in refugee settings, the paper illustrates how the exercise of teacher autonomy is intricately shaped by ongoing negotiation between agency and the structural realities in their environments. Teachers demonstrated adaptability and development of new practices in navigating cultural and social dynamics, while simultaneously exercising autonomy in ways that aligned with their values and professional goals. To this end, the PEER process and the material generated through this approach were revealing. Rather than presenting teachers as "passive" and "silenced", the analysis suggests that they analysed challenges and were mindful of constraints in their environments, but actively made choices, engaged in innovative practices, and sought opportunities for professional growth and improvement in educational outcomes for their students.

The analysis sheds light on the dynamic, multilevel nature of autonomy, showing how teachers' actions emerged in the micro world of day-to-day professional lives in ways that were shaped and negotiated within personal and social contexts, technological systems, and relationships (i.e. with wider communities), and were affected by their own histories and motivations. The importance of the micro-practices and processes logged as part of those teachers' experiences captures our attention and may help those who are interested in working with teachers in refugee settings to understand the context in which their practice takes place. An immediate implication is related to understanding post-pandemic technology use by teachers alongside a consideration of how some of the crisis-prompted practices can be sustained in language learning and programme design. Further studies are needed on developing strategies that help teachers in refugee settings become more aware of the notion of autonomy and technology, to be able to analyse challenges, set objectives, make plans and evaluate progress, but ultimately support them in becoming "socio-politically engaged educators and researchers" (Dooley *et al.*, 2021: 228 as cited in Fuchs *et al.*, 2021). These would enable the teachers to leverage opportunities for autonomy within their unique circumstances and their wider socio-political contexts.

To conclude, through the methodological approach followed, the paper centres the teacher in refugee settings as an "agentic subject" – an individual able to not only learn the new knowledge and skills needed to do their work but also "act as feeling and willing subjects who actively prioritize, choose, and consider what is important and worth aspiring in their life and future, and thus practise agency in their life" (Biesta, 2010, as cited in Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013: 62). It highlighted the expanding dimensions of autonomous language teaching and deepened our conceptualisation of the pedagogical norms and approaches in refugee contexts. The teacher narratives illustrated the complex circumstances and dynamics they face in technology-poor environments, a context that arguably deserves more attention from the CALL community. With rising social and educational inequalities and divides, the need to consider teacher autonomy and how teachers can place the technological constraints and affordances of their teaching and learning environments in their wider socio-digital-political contexts is greater than ever.

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