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School Leadership as Bounded Professional-Capacity Conversion in Formal EFL Education: Developing the LENS–CAPS Framework

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study aimed to develop the LENS–CAPS framework and examine the relationships between teacher-perceived school leadership and professional agency, perceived collective capacity, academic optimism, and sustained professional-development engagement among Iranian EFL teachers.

Methods and Materials: An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was integrated with a purposive critical synthesis of the literature on school leadership, teacher agency, policy enactment, and formal-school EFL education. In the quantitative phase, 205 EFL teachers from accessible public and private schools in District 22 of Tehran completed measures of teacher-perceived school leadership, professional agency, perceived collective capacity, academic optimism, and professional-development engagement. The measurement and structural models were evaluated using partial least squares structural equation modeling with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. In the qualitative phase, follow-up semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 purposefully selected teachers and three school leaders. Interview data were analyzed thematically and integrated with the quantitative findings and critical synthesis to construct the LENS–CAPS framework.

Findings: Teacher-perceived school leadership was significantly and positively associated with professional agency ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), perceived collective capacity ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$), academic optimism ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), and sustained professional-development engagement ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$). All four hypothesized structural paths were therefore supported, with the strongest relationship observed for professional-development engagement and the weakest, although still substantial, relationship observed for perceived collective capacity.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that school leadership is associated with multiple, conceptually distinct professional capacities, but leadership support becomes consequential only when converted into legitimate and actionable professional opportunities. The resulting LENS–CAPS framework identifies language-specific instructional understanding, enabling professional conditions, networked professional structures, and system-facing policy mediation as leadership functions operating through legitimacy, access, coordination, and protection.

Keywords: *school leadership; EFL education; teacher agency; collective capacity; academic optimism; professional development; policy enactment; LENS–CAPS framework*

1. Introduction

School leadership is widely recognized as a central influence on the quality of teaching, organizational learning, and school improvement. Nevertheless, leadership rarely affects classroom outcomes through a simple or direct process. Its influence is primarily exercised by shaping teachers' working conditions, professional relationships, access to resources, opportunities for learning, participation in decision-making, and confidence in exercising professional judgment. Successful school leaders establish organizational direction, support staff development, redesign working conditions, and create coherent environments in which teachers can concentrate on improving instruction (Leithwood et al., 2008). Leadership practices that are closely connected to teaching and teacher learning appear particularly consequential because they influence the instructional processes most proximal to student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008). Accordingly, the significance of school leadership lies not merely in the leader's formal authority or preferred leadership style, but in whether leadership practices generate conditions that teachers can convert into sustained professional action.

This conversion is especially important in formal English as a foreign language (EFL) education. EFL teachers are expected to make continuous judgments concerning lesson pacing, classroom interaction, learner participation, corrective feedback, materials, assessment, and the balance between communicative competence and examination preparation. At the same time, these judgments are exercised within organizational structures characterized by prescribed curricula, administrative regulations, limited instructional time, standardized assessment expectations, and unequal access to resources. Although curriculum flexibility and professional autonomy can enable teachers to adapt instruction to learner needs, formal discretion does not necessarily guarantee that teachers possess the practical capacity to use it (Oecd, 2024). A school may officially endorse teacher initiative while its timetables, reporting procedures, workload arrangements, assessment demands, or resource limitations prevent meaningful innovation. The fundamental issue is therefore not only whether teachers receive support or autonomy, but whether the organizational environment converts that support into legitimate and usable professional capacity.

Teacher agency offers a valuable theoretical lens for understanding this issue. Rather than representing an enduring individual attribute, agency can be understood as an achievement that emerges through the interaction of personal histories, professional purposes, available cultural and material resources, and the conditions of the present environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). From this ecological perspective, teachers do not simply possess more or less agency independently of context. Their capacity to act is produced through the relationship between what they bring to a situation, what they hope to accomplish, and what their institutional environment enables or constrains. The ecological approach consequently directs attention away from decontextualized notions of teacher autonomy and toward the temporal, relational, and structural conditions through which teachers exercise judgment and influence educational practice (Priestley et al., 2015). Even knowledgeable and strongly motivated teachers may be unable to enact their intentions when their schools provide insufficient time, weak institutional protection, restricted decision-making opportunities, or limited access to professional resources.

Teachers' beliefs also contribute to how professional possibilities are interpreted and pursued. Beliefs about learners, knowledge, teaching, curriculum, professional responsibility, and the possibility of change inform teachers' judgments regarding which actions are appropriate and achievable (Biesta et al., 2015). Yet beliefs alone do not determine agency. Their practical significance depends on whether the organizational context recognizes teachers' expertise and provides opportunities through which their purposes can be translated into action. This distinction is essential because invitations to innovate may remain symbolic when teachers lack the authority, collaboration, resources, or protection required for implementation. Conversely, formal autonomy may remain underused when teachers do not experience professional trust, developmental feedback, shared purpose, or confidence in colleagues. Teacher agency must therefore be examined as a contextually situated accomplishment rather than as an isolated psychological disposition.

Policy enactment further complicates the relationship between leadership and teacher action. Educational policies are not simply transmitted from ministries or administrative authorities and reproduced unchanged in classrooms. Schools interpret, translate, prioritize, and reconstruct policy requirements in relation to their histories, staffing arrangements, material circumstances, accountability pressures, and student populations (Ball et al., 2012). School leaders occupy a pivotal position in this process because they explain official expectations, allocate resources, establish

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schedules, authorize instructional adjustments, organize monitoring systems, and communicate with external authorities. Leadership can therefore protect responsible professional adaptation or, alternatively, intensify compliance by treating policy as a fixed script. This mediating function becomes particularly important in centralized education systems, where schools may share a common curriculum but differ considerably in the professional space available to teachers.

The Iranian EFL context makes these tensions especially visible. English instruction in mainstream schools is situated at the intersection of pedagogical aspirations, societal expectations, government policies, examination requirements, and practical limitations affecting classroom instruction (Gholaminejad & Raeisi-Vanani, 2021). Curriculum reforms may promote communicative or learner-centered teaching, while high-stakes examinations, limited lesson time, large classes, centralized materials, and administrative expectations continue to reward content coverage and test preparation. Iranian teachers consequently enact curriculum reform through negotiation rather than straightforward implementation, drawing on their professional knowledge while responding to institutional demands and local constraints (Rezaee & Seyri, 2021). These circumstances illustrate why teacher agency should not be equated with resistance to policy or unrestricted independence. Agency may instead involve responsible adaptation, strategic compliance, selective innovation, or efforts to reconcile conflicting instructional and assessment expectations.

Assessment represents a particularly consequential domain of this negotiation. Language assessment teacher education can strengthen teachers' assessment knowledge, professional confidence, and willingness to exercise informed judgment, but the enactment of such learning continues to depend on contextual affordances and restrictions (Estaji, 2024). In Iran's high-stakes EFL environment, teachers must frequently reconcile formative and communicative assessment principles with examination preparation, curricular pacing, parental expectations, and institutional supervision. Recent evidence indicates that the Konkur, school principals, and parents jointly shape novice EFL teachers' classroom assessment decisions, demonstrating that assessment practices emerge from an ecology of interacting professional and institutional pressures (Mirsanjari, 2026b). Teachers may also use blended learning and ecological assessment literacy to negotiate testing demands, but their adaptations remain bounded by time, infrastructure, accountability, and the legitimacy afforded to their professional reasoning (Mirsanjari, 2026a). Thus, increased competence does not automatically become enacted capacity.

Research outside Iran reveals comparable relationships among leadership, professional identity, teacher initiative, and contextual constraint. In Taiwanese elementary schools, instructional leadership can influence EFL teachers' lesson planning and implementation of curriculum innovation when leaders engage substantively with instructional work (Chien, 2026). In Vietnam, principal commitment to teacher learning has been translated into professional-development opportunities and school-based structures, although the practical value of these arrangements depends on how leadership intentions are enacted in everyday organizational routines (Tran et al., 2021). Vietnamese teachers' identities and professional actions are also shaped by micropolitical relationships involving principals, colleagues, authority, recognition, and access to influence (Tran-Thanh, 2024). Furthermore, teacher leadership may enable pedagogical innovation under difficult contextual conditions when teachers are supported in mobilizing expertise, building collaboration, and negotiating institutional restrictions (Nguyen et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that effective EFL leadership must be simultaneously instructional, relational, organizational, and policy responsive.

Language teacher leadership is itself a developing field whose conceptual boundaries remain unsettled. It has been associated with classroom innovation, peer learning, mentoring, advocacy, curriculum development, and influence beyond the individual classroom; however, these activities are enabled or restricted by organizational recognition and access to decision-making structures (Reinders et al., 2025). Leadership cannot therefore be reduced to actions undertaken only by formally appointed administrators. Teacher expertise may be distributed across professional networks, but it becomes consequential only when school routines give that expertise legitimacy, coordination, and influence. Recent capability-oriented scholarship similarly conceptualizes leadership as a process of converting organizational resources and opportunities into capabilities for responsive teaching in diverse schools (Kostogriz et al., 2026). This perspective is especially useful for formal EFL education because it focuses attention on how leaders make professional action possible rather than merely describing leadership behaviors.

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One outcome of such conversion is professional agency, which includes teachers' capacity to exercise instructional judgment, initiate change, adapt pedagogy, participate in professional decisions, and influence the conditions of their work. Recent measurement research demonstrates that agency is multidimensional, encompassing forms of individual, collaborative, instructional, and developmental action rather than a single generalized disposition (Leijen et al., 2024). Within language education, ecologically informed instruments have likewise been developed to assess how EFL teachers' agency is shaped by personal capacities and contextual possibilities (Ghamoushi et al., 2022). Assessment-specific research has further shown that teachers' agency includes their capacity to interpret evidence, adapt assessment, communicate judgments, and negotiate contextual expectations (Ghiasvand et al., 2023). These advances strengthen the measurement of agency but also underline the need to explain its organizational antecedents. Knowing that teachers differ in perceived agency does not, by itself, reveal how school leadership turns support, professional knowledge, and formal discretion into enacted professional action.

Leadership may also influence teachers through perceived collective capacity. When teachers believe that their faculty can organize and execute the actions required to support students, they are more likely to persist, share responsibility, and approach instructional difficulties as manageable professional problems. Collective capacity is not identical to collective agency: the former concerns shared perceptions of capability, whereas the latter requires observable coordination and joint action. Leadership may strengthen both by developing a common purpose, facilitating collaboration, connecting expertise, and ensuring follow-through. Nevertheless, teachers' reports of collective capacity should not automatically be treated as objective school-level properties. Whether individual perceptions can legitimately be aggregated depends on empirical evidence of within-school agreement and between-school variation, an issue that requires multilevel analysis rather than conceptual assumption (Preacher et al., 2010). This distinction is particularly important when data are collected from teachers but theoretical conclusions concern schools.

Academic optimism represents another organizationally relevant capacity. It integrates a strong academic emphasis, trust among members of the school community, and confidence in the faculty's ability to promote learning. Schools characterized by academic optimism maintain ambitious but attainable expectations while fostering the relational trust and collective confidence required to pursue them (Hoy et al., 2006). Leadership can cultivate this orientation by communicating coherent goals, protecting instructional priorities, supporting teachers during difficulties, and framing student achievement as a shared responsibility. In EFL settings, academic optimism may help teachers maintain meaningful language-learning goals despite examination pressure, uneven resources, or learner disengagement. However, optimism should not be interpreted as a demand that teachers compensate indefinitely for structural deficiencies. Its productive value depends on organizational conditions that connect confidence and academic purpose with realistic opportunities for action.

Sustained engagement in professional development constitutes a fourth important capacity. Participation in professional development is not adequately captured by attendance at isolated workshops. Meaningful engagement involves cognitive investment, active participation, collaboration, experimentation, reflection, and continued application to classroom practice (Kelly et al., 2022). School leaders influence this engagement through the selection and sequencing of learning opportunities, provision of time, relevance of content, access to mentoring, expectations for collaboration, and feedback on implementation. Where professional learning is disconnected from teachers' instructional problems or unsupported after training, participation may remain procedural. Diagnostic and intervention-oriented research on agency during curriculum reform similarly shows that contradictions within the activity system must be identified and addressed if professional learning is to produce durable change (Dinh & Sannino, 2024). Professional development therefore becomes consequential when leadership links learning opportunities to authorization, resources, collaborative structures, and feasible classroom enactment.

Despite these theoretical and empirical advances, the literature remains fragmented. General school-leadership research often examines broad leadership styles or composite perceptions of support, while EFL research commonly focuses on agency, identity, assessment literacy, teacher leadership, or professional development as separate phenomena. As a result, limited attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which leadership resources become usable professional capacity across multiple teacher outcomes. The distinction between professional authorization and actionable professional space is especially underdeveloped. Authorization refers to relational and

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normative recognition that teachers may exercise informed judgment, whereas actionable space refers to the practical opportunity to exercise it through time, resources, procedural flexibility, collaboration, and institutional protection. When authorization is high but actionable space is low, teachers may experience an agency bottleneck: they are encouraged to exercise professional judgment but cannot sustain its enactment.

This proposed bottleneck is not appropriately represented by a simple difference score between authorization and opportunity. Congruence and mismatch hypotheses require analytical approaches capable of examining nonlinear combinations of two conditions, for which polynomial regression and response-surface analysis provide a more defensible framework (Nestler et al., 2019). More broadly, future validation of leadership-capacity models must establish that their constructs remain empirically distinguishable and comparable across relevant teacher and school groups. Measurement invariance is necessary before apparent differences across gender, career stage, school sector, or cultural setting can be interpreted as substantive rather than measurement-related (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). Such methodological requirements are important because a framework intended to explain leadership, agency, collective capacity, academic optimism, and professional-development engagement must avoid collapsing related but theoretically distinct capacities into a single positive organizational factor.

Accordingly, the present study develops the LENS–CAPS framework of bounded professional-capacity conversion. LENS identifies four leadership functions: language-specific instructional understanding, enabling professional conditions, networked professional structures, and system-facing policy mediation. These functions are proposed to operate through legitimacy, access, coordination, and protection, thereby shaping professional authorization and actionable professional space. CAPS represents perceived collective capacity, academic optimism, professional agency, and sustained professional-development engagement. The framework integrates ecological agency, policy enactment, capability-oriented leadership, and organizational perspectives while recognizing curriculum rigidity, examination pressure, workload, bureaucracy, and resource scarcity as substantive boundary conditions. It also distinguishes teacher-level perceptions from school-level properties and treats cross-sectional associations as evidence for theory building rather than as proof of causal processes.

The aim of this study was to develop the LENS–CAPS framework by integrating a critical synthesis of formal-school EFL scholarship with explanatory sequential mixed-methods evidence from Iranian EFL teachers and school leaders to clarify how school leadership is associated with professional agency, perceived collective capacity, academic optimism, and sustained professional-development engagement under contextual constraints.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design

The design combined (a) a purposive critical synthesis, (b) an explanatory sequential mixed-methods strand, and (c) explicit model construction. The synthesis located recurring functions and gaps; the survey estimated four teacher-level associations; interviews examined the processes and constraints behind those associations; and integration translated convergent patterns into constructs and falsifiable propositions. The evidentiary role and limits of each stream were kept separate.

2.2. Purposive critical synthesis

The literature component was designed for conceptual integration, not as a systematic or scoping review. Searches conducted across ERIC, Google Scholar, publisher platforms, DOI records, and backward/forward citation chains covered 2000–July 2026. Search combinations linked *school leadership*, *principal*, *instructional leadership*, *teacher leadership*, or *distributed leadership* with *EFL*, *ESL*, *language teacher*, *teacher agency*, *professional development*, *academic optimism*, *collective efficacy*, *curriculum*, or *policy enactment*. Eligible evidence addressed leadership in primary or secondary formal language education; stand-alone private institutes and higher education were excluded unless an adjacent study was necessary to clarify a mechanism or measurement issue.

Sources were purposively retained for directness to formal-school EFL, methodological transparency, recency, and explanatory leverage. The 11 recent studies used most directly in formal framework construction are fully disclosed in Table 1; foundational leadership, agency, policy, and measurement sources provide theoretical support. Because complete search, deduplication, and exclusion logs were not retained, no claim of exhaustiveness, PRISMA compliance, or review-derived effect estimation is made. Studies were charted by context, design, leadership construct, mechanism,

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outcome, and limitation, and synthesized through comparison of recurring enabling and constraining patterns rather than vote counting.

2.3. Context, participants, and procedure

The empirical strand followed a quantitative-priority explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) in accessible public and private formal schools in District 22 of Tehran. Schools served as access clusters, but no school identifier was retained; the unit of analysis was therefore the individual teacher. Of 250 survey packages distributed, 224 were returned. Screening removed 19 questionnaires with substantial missingness, straight-lining, or influential multivariate outliers, including six cases identified by Mahalanobis distance. The final sample comprised 205 teachers (82% usable response rate). Limited item-level missing values in otherwise usable records were mean substituted, a decision treated as a limitation.

For the explanatory phase, 12 survey respondents were purposefully selected to represent relatively high, moderate, and low outcome profiles, and three school leaders provided supplementary contextual accounts. The teacher group included seven women and five men with 4–18 years of experience and bachelor's or master's degrees in English-related fields. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, were conducted and transcribed verbatim in Persian, and were coded using participant labels T1–T12 and SL1–SL3. Quotations reported in English were translated and checked against the Persian transcripts for meaning and tone.

2.4. Measures

Teacher-perceived school leadership was measured with the copyrighted Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X rater form (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Its indicators were modeled as an overall teacher-perception construct; the analysis did not compare leadership styles and did not treat the MLQ as a measure of distributed leadership. Professional agency was assessed with a 15-item context-adapted measure covering instructional judgment, pedagogical adaptation, reflection, initiative, and participation. Perceived collective capacity was measured with Goddard's (2002) 12-item Short Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale. The measure directly captures shared efficacy beliefs, not observed collective action. Teacher-perceived academic optimism was assessed with the Academic Optimism Profile (Hoy et al., 2006), and professional-development engagement with an eight-item adaptation of Kelly et al.'s (2022) scale.

All instruments and interview guides were administered in Persian after expert review for content relevance and linguistic/contextual suitability. A separate pilot with 30 school-based EFL teachers identified minor wording and administration issues. In the final PLS model, theoretically guided parcel scores represented five leadership domains, five professional-agency domains, and four domains for each remaining outcome. Thus, model indicators were composite parcels rather than original item numbers. Across constructs, Cronbach's α ranged from .83 to .88, composite reliability from .88 to .91, and average variance extracted from .65 to .69.

2.5. Analysis and integration

The reflective measurement and direct structural models were estimated in SmartPLS 4 following prediction-oriented PLS-SEM guidance (Hair et al., 2022). Indicator quality, internal consistency, average variance extracted, Fornell–Larcker comparisons (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and HTMT ratios (Henseler et al., 2015) were inspected before structural interpretation. The four paths from perceived school leadership to the teacher-perceived outcomes were tested with 5,000 bootstrap resamples; standardized coefficients, confidence intervals, R^2, f^2, and Q^2 are reported. Harman's first unrotated factor accounted for 38.4% of variance, but this diagnostic cannot rule out common-method bias. Because the models were cross-sectional, same-source, single-predictor, and nonmultilevel, results are associations rather than causal or school-level effects.

Persian transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic procedure. Coding combined deductive attention to the four survey outcomes with inductive identification of leadership processes and barriers. Repeated reading, cross-case comparison, coherence checks, and the retention of constraining or qualifying cases supported interpretive credibility. Integration used a joint-display logic: quantitative patterns were aligned with interview themes and quotations, then compared with the critical synthesis. A concept entered the framework only when it explained evidence across streams and could be expressed as a potentially disconfirmable proposition. The resulting LENS functions, conversion mechanisms, authorization–space distinction, CAPS profile, and bottleneck configuration are theoretical products to be validated, not established latent structures.

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3. Findings and Results

3.1. The recent evidence base is growing, but still fragmented

The 2021–2026 literature shows growing attention to teacher agency, teacher leadership, professional learning, and leadership support, but direct school-leadership research in formal EFL remains limited. The evidence is geographically uneven and dominated by qualitative or cross-sectional designs. This makes mechanism-focused synthesis more defensible than claims about a universal leadership effect.

The strongest recent direct evidence supports three points. Leadership matters when it is tied to the instructional object: Chien (2026) links instructional leadership with lesson planning and curriculum innovation, while Tran et al. (2021) shows how principal commitment can be translated into school-based professional-development structures. Leadership is also relational and micropolitical: Tran-Thanh (2024) demonstrates how principal and colleague power relations shape EFL teachers' professional identity and action, and Nguyen et al. (2025) shows that teacher leadership can sustain innovation under contextual constraints.

Agency research reinforces the distinction between competence and opportunity. Estaji (2024) shows that professional learning can expand assessment agency while contextual affordances still shape enactment. Mirsanjari (2026a, 2026b) likewise documents the combined force of principal oversight, high-stakes assessment, parental expectations, time scarcity, and strategic adaptation in Iranian EFL settings. Psychometric studies provide increasingly strong measures of ecological agency (Ghamoushi et al., 2022; Ghiasvand et al., 2023; Leijen et al., 2024), but they do not by themselves establish school-level or temporal conversion mechanisms.

Kostogriz et al. (2026) provides an important adjacent conceptual advance by treating leadership as conversion of organizational arrangements into teacher capabilities. Its value for the present framework is conceptual rather than direct EFL evidence, reinforcing the need to specify how resources become real professional opportunities.

Table 1

Recent studies used directly in framework construction

Study and context	Design	Contribution	Evidentiary limit
Tran et al. (2021), Vietnamese formal high school	Qualitative case using leader, teacher, and document evidence	Shows how principal commitment is translated into school-based professional-development structures.	One high-performing school; mechanism evidence, not an effect estimate.
Rezaee and Seyri (2021), Iranian curriculum reform	Qualitative agency study	Demonstrates situated professional judgment under centralized reform.	Leadership is adjacent rather than focal.
Ghamoushi et al. (2022), Iranian EFL teachers	Instrument development; pilot n = 222; factor analysis/SEM	Strengthens ecological measurement of EFL teacher agency.	Nonprobability self-report; no leadership or school-level test.
Ghiasvand et al. (2023), Iranian EFL assessment	Scale development; n = 539	Differentiates ecological dimensions of assessment agency.	Domain-specific and cross-sectional.
Tran-Thanh (2024), Vietnamese primary EFL	Qualitative interviews; n = 9	Identifies principal and colleague micropolitics shaping identity and action.	Small, teacher-account-dependent sample.
Estaji (2024), Iranian EFL assessment	Phenomenological study; 50 teachers in two purposive streams	Shows that professional learning expands assessment agency within contextual affordances and constraints.	Self-reported experience; no direct school-leadership test.
Nguyen et al. (2025), Vietnamese school-based innovation	Qualitative teacher-leadership study	Shows how collegial leadership can sustain innovation under constraints.	Context-specific; formal and teacher leadership partly overlap.
Reinders et al. (2025), language education	Scoping review	Maps pedagogical and managerial forms of language-teacher leadership.	Focuses teacher rather than principal leadership.
Chien (2026), Taiwanese elementary English	Qualitative study; 10 teachers plus documents/observations	Links instructional leadership to lesson planning and curriculum innovation.	Small, recent study requiring replication.
Mirsanjari (2026a), Iranian public secondary EFL	Sequential mixed methods; survey n = 158, interviews n = 20, and 18 test documents	Locates principal oversight within examination, parent, time, and support pressures.	Novice-teacher assessment context.
Kostogriz et al. (2026), diverse schools	Leadership-as-conversion study	Provides an adjacent capability-based account of organizational conversion.	Not EFL-specific; requires subject and policy specification.

Note. Selection was purposive. The table discloses all recent studies given direct interpretive weight in constructing the formal model; it is not a ranked or exhaustive evidence inventory.

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3.2. Four recurrent challenges cut across the literature

The first is conceptual overbreadth. "Supportive leadership," "transformational leadership," "instructional leadership," and "distributed leadership" are frequently invoked as if the label itself specifies what happens. In EFL settings, however, leadership cannot be evaluated independently of language-pedagogical literacy, assessment demands, and the status of subject expertise. A generally supportive leader may still be unable to judge communicative pedagogy, recognize principled materials adaptation, or align professional learning with language-specific problems.

The second challenge is relational–structural decoupling. Many studies identify trust, respect, recognition, voice, and feedback as positive, but these relational resources are often examined separately from time, workload, materials, scheduling, assessment, and bureaucracy. The combined evidence suggests that this separation is theoretically costly. Relational support can authorize action without making it feasible. Structural resources can exist without teachers believing they are entitled to use them. The key object of study is therefore not either side alone, but their alignment.

The third challenge is level-of-analysis slippage. Leadership is often described as a school property even when measured through one-time individual teacher perceptions. Teachers are nested within schools, yet many quantitative studies lack enough participants per school, school identifiers, leader data, or multilevel models to distinguish idiosyncratic perception from shared organizational climate. This matters because a teacher's satisfaction with a principal is not equivalent to a school-level leadership condition. The same problem affects academic optimism, collective capacity, and collaboration when individual reports are aggregated without evidence of within-school agreement and between-school variance.

The fourth challenge is weak temporal evidence. Cross-sectional designs dominate. Positive teacher outcomes may cause teachers to evaluate leadership more favorably; successful schools may attract or retain stronger leaders and teachers; or unmeasured organizational advantages may influence both. Longitudinal designs are therefore necessary not merely as a methodological refinement but as a direct test of the theory's sequence.

3.3. Teacher-perceived leadership is associated with all four focal outcomes

The measurement results supported empirical separation of the five teacher-perception constructs in this sample. Square roots of AVE ranged from .81 to .83 and exceeded the corresponding correlations; all HTMT ratios were below .85 (highest = .72). The four direct paths were positive, their bootstrap intervals excluded zero, and all p values were below .001 (Table 2). Perceived school leadership accounted for 31%–40% of the variance in the outcomes, with the largest coefficient and R^2 for professional-development engagement.

Table 2

Direct teacher-level associations in the focal PLS models (n = 205)

Outcome	Bootstrap result	Model information
Professional agency	β = .61; SD = .052; t = 11.73; 95% CI [.51, .71]; p < .001	R^2 = .37; adjusted R^2 = .36; f^2 = .59; Q^2 = .24
Perceived collective capacity	β = .56; SD = .058; t = 9.66; 95% CI [.45, .67]; p < .001	R^2 = .31; adjusted R^2 = .30; f^2 = .45; Q^2 = .19
Teacher-perceived academic optimism	β = .58; SD = .055; t = 10.55; 95% CI [.47, .68]; p < .001	R^2 = .34; adjusted R^2 = .33; f^2 = .52; Q^2 = .22
Professional-development engagement	β = .63; SD = .050; t = 12.60; 95% CI [.53, .72]; p < .001	R^2 = .40; adjusted R^2 = .39; f^2 = .67; Q^2 = .27

Note. Each outcome was estimated in a direct single-predictor model with perceived school leadership as the predictor. The collective measure was Goddard's Short Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale and is therefore reported as perceived collective capacity rather than observed collective agency. In single-predictor models, β, R^2, and f^2 are mathematically related and should not be read as independent corroborating tests. Q^2 values indicate in-sample predictive relevance, not validated out-of-sample performance.

The coefficients are substantively large within this sample but cannot be interpreted as unique causal effects. Positive outcome dispositions may influence evaluations of leadership, common response processes may inflate

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covariation, and unmeasured teacher or organizational conditions may affect both sides. Moreover, without school identifiers, the analysis cannot distinguish an individual evaluation from a shared school climate. The results therefore establish a coherent teacher-perception pattern that requires explanatory and longitudinal follow-up.

3.4. Interviews explain the associations and expose their limits

The thematic results connected each quantitative outcome to a distinct set of experienced leadership processes (Table 3). Recognition and trust legitimized professional judgment; consultation opened access to decisions; scheduled collaboration coordinated expertise; high academic expectations supported optimism; and nonpunitive feedback linked observation to professional learning. These processes are analytically more informative than an undifferentiated label such as supportive leadership.

Table 3

Integrated display of quantitative patterns and qualitative mechanisms

CAPS domain	Quantitative pattern	Selected interview evidence	Integrated interpretation
Professional agency	$\beta = .61$; $R^2 = .37$	"If the principal trusts me, I feel free to choose the best method for my students. I know the level of my class better than anyone else, so this freedom helps me teach more effectively." (T2)	Trust provides professional authorization, but its enactment remains contingent on usable time and policy room.
Perceived collective capacity / collective agency	$\beta = .56$; $R^2 = .31$	"If collaboration is not planned and supported by leadership, teachers usually become busy with their own classes. Leaders must create time and space for teamwork." (SL1)	The survey captures shared capacity beliefs; scheduled collaboration is the qualitative bridge toward collective action.
Academic optimism	$\beta = .58$; $R^2 = .34$	"Our principal always says that even weak students can improve if we support them properly. This belief affects teachers too, because we begin to look at students more positively." (T7)	Leadership messages combine academic emphasis with confidence in improvement; the result remains a teacher perception, not an aggregated school property.
Professional-development engagement	$\beta = .63$; $R^2 = .40$	"When feedback is supportive, not critical, it helps us improve. We feel that observation is for learning, not for blaming." (T6)	Developmental rather than punitive feedback converts supervision into learning support.
Cross-cutting constraints	Not modeled quantitatively	"We want to attend more training sessions and try new teaching ideas, but our workload is very heavy. Sometimes there is no time or energy left." (T12)	Authorization can coexist with insufficient actionable space, motivating the bottleneck proposition.

Note. Quotations are English translations of Persian interviews and are identified only by participant code. Statistical patterns are teacher-level associations, while qualitative mechanisms are interpretive explanations rather than tested mediators.

The limiting evidence was equally important. Workload and fatigue reduced time for planning, experimentation, reflection, and learning; centralized curriculum and fixed examinations narrowed the changes teachers considered safe; bureaucratic reporting displaced instructional work; and limited technology, materials, and relevant training restricted feasible adaptation. These barriers were not always attributed to unsupportive principals. A teacher could experience encouragement and still lack room to act. Leadership therefore matters by shaping the local legitimacy and organization of professional judgment, but its influence is bounded by conditions that may exceed local authority.

3.5. Hidden patterns emerge when the three evidence streams are examined together

First, leadership effects are best evidenced for proximal teacher and organizational processes—trust, professional learning, collaboration, agency, identity, participation, and instructional adaptation—rather than direct student achievement. Future models should therefore examine a sequence from leadership functions through conversion mechanisms and teacher capacities to observed instructional quality and proximal learner outcomes.

Second, language-specific understanding appears to function as a threshold condition: generic support is unlikely to protect or resource good EFL practice if leaders cannot recognize credible language pedagogy or mobilize specialist

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expertise. Distributed expertise can compensate for limited principal knowledge only when teacher leadership is given time, legitimacy, coordination, and follow-through.

Third, networked structures are not equivalent to delegation. Teacher leadership without authority or protected time can become additional work rather than genuine influence.

Fourth, policy mediation is part of the leadership mechanism rather than merely a context variable. The same central requirement can be experienced differently across schools depending on how it is explained, sequenced, monitored, documented, and communicated upward, creating possible between-school variation even in centralized systems.

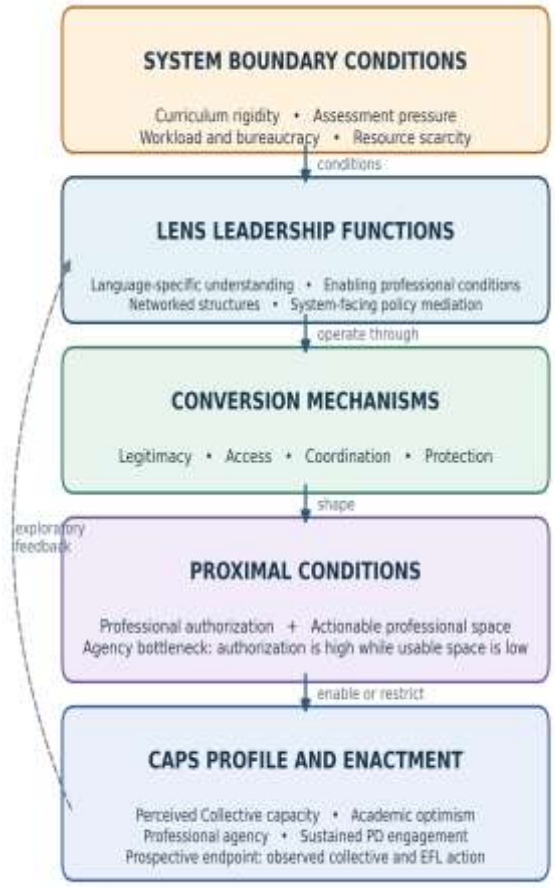
Finally, measurement has often lagged behind theory. Studies invoke ecological and organizational processes but test single-level self-report correlations. The next generation of research must match theory with multilevel, multisource, longitudinal designs. The agency bottleneck should also be modeled as a configuration: polynomial regression and response-surface analysis can distinguish high–high, high-authorization/low-space, and other profiles that a subtraction score would confound.

3.6. The LENS–CAPS Framework

The LENS–CAPS framework organizes the combined evidence into a testable sequence. It is not assumed to operate identically in every school; its purpose is to specify the minimum functions, mechanisms, outcomes, and boundary conditions needed to explain why supportive leadership sometimes becomes usable professional capacity and sometimes does not.

Figure 1

Conceptual architecture of bounded professional-capacity conversion



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3.6.1. *LENS leadership functions*

Language-specific instructional understanding is the capacity to recognize core features of language learning—interaction, progression, formative assessment, learner heterogeneity, feedback, and principled materials adaptation. It does not require principals to become language-method specialists, but it does require enough disciplinary literacy to recognize credible practice and mobilize specialist expertise.

Enabling professional conditions include trust, voice, developmental feedback, protected time, relevant learning, workload attention, and resources. Networked professional structures include mentoring, peer observation, collaborative planning, teacher leadership, and coordinated expertise. System-facing policy mediation concerns how leaders interpret, clarify, sequence, communicate, and where possible buffer curriculum, assessment, reporting, and accountability demands.

The four functions are interdependent. Understanding without enabling conditions can remain symbolic; enabling conditions without networks can isolate expertise; networks without policy mediation may fail under accountability pressure; policy mediation without instructional understanding can simply repackage compliance. LENS is therefore an aligned profile rather than a set of interchangeable styles.

3.6.2. *Conversion mechanisms*

Legitimacy, access, coordination, and protection specify how LENS may change teachers' work environments. Legitimacy validates professionally reasoned adaptation; access makes time, information, materials, mentoring, and technology reachable; coordination connects expertise and routines; protection reduces avoidable friction and provides institutional backing for defensible action.

Separating mechanisms from leadership functions makes failure explainable. A school may offer professional development without protecting time, invite voice without follow-through, or distribute responsibilities without authority. Mechanism measures can reveal where conversion stalls rather than merely producing a weak global leadership score.

3.6.3. *Authorization, actionable space, and the bottleneck*

Professional authorization is the recognition that teachers may use informed judgment; actionable professional space is the practical opportunity to enact that judgment through time, flexibility, resources, workable approval, and institutional support. The two should be measured separately.

The bottleneck hypothesis concerns their joint configuration. Outcomes should be strongest when authorization and space are both high, while high authorization combined with low space should produce weaker sustained enactment. Response-surface methods are preferable because congruence and incongruence depend on the absolute levels of both components.

3.6.4. *CAPS outcomes*

CAPS keeps four outcomes connected but distinct. Professional agency concerns intentional influence over instruction and professional work; perceived collective capacity concerns shared beliefs that may support, but do not demonstrate, coordinated collective agency; academic optimism combines academic emphasis, relational trust, and collective confidence; sustained PD engagement concerns coherent, active, collaborative professional learning beyond isolated workshops.

Differentiated pathways are expected: legitimacy and protection may be especially relevant to professional agency, coordination to the transition from collective-capacity beliefs to collective action, trust-related processes to academic optimism, and access plus coordination to sustained professional learning. These are propositions to be tested, not assumed.

3.6.5. *Boundary conditions and feedback*

Four recurring boundary conditions are curriculum rigidity, assessment pressure, workload/bureaucracy, and resource scarcity. They may weaken LENS-to-mechanism or mechanism-to-space pathways and may vary by school level, sector, region, class size, and leadership stability.

The model also allows feedback. Stronger teacher capacities may generate more credible expertise, collaborative routines, and upward communication, thereby strengthening networked leadership and policy mediation. Reciprocal paths are theoretically plausible but require longitudinal evidence.

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Table 4

Core constructs in the LENS–CAPS framework

Construct	Working definition	Role
L – Language-specific instructional understanding	Recognition of language-learning processes, EFL pedagogy, assessment, interaction, and principled materials adaptation.	Leadership function
E – Enabling professional conditions	Trust, voice, developmental feedback, protected time, and access to relevant resources.	Leadership function
N – Networked professional structures	Mentoring, collaborative problem solving, peer feedback, knowledge sharing, and recognized teacher-led activity.	Leadership function
S – System-facing policy mediation	Interpretation, clarification, upward communication, and management of curriculum, assessment, reporting, and accountability demands.	Leadership function
Legitimacy	Professional reasoning and responsible experimentation are treated as valid contributions.	Conversion mechanism
Access	Teachers can reach timely information, materials, mentoring, technology, and usable professional time.	Conversion mechanism
Coordination	Responsibilities, expertise, follow-through, and collective routines are connected rather than fragmented.	Conversion mechanism
Protection	Leaders reduce avoidable administrative friction and defend professionally reasoned adaptation within legitimate boundaries.	Conversion mechanism
Professional authorization	Relational/normative recognition that teachers may use informed judgment.	Proximal condition
Actionable professional space	Practical opportunity to enact judgment through time, flexibility, resources, workable approval, and institutional support.	Proximal condition
Perceived collective capacity	Teachers' beliefs about the faculty's shared capability; the focal quantitative C indicator.	CAPS capacity
Collective agency	Coordinated professional action through which teachers identify needs, design responses, and follow through collectively; to be observed in future validation.	Enacted extension of C
Academic optimism	Academic emphasis, relational trust, and collective confidence directed toward meaningful learning.	CAPS capacity
Professional agency	Intentional, reflective, evidence-informed action influencing instruction and professional work.	CAPS capacity
Sustained PD engagement	Continued, coherent, active, collaborative, practice-linked professional learning beyond isolated workshops.	CAPS capacity

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study developed the LENS–CAPS framework by integrating a critical synthesis of the literature with quantitative and qualitative evidence from Iranian EFL teachers and school leaders. The quantitative findings indicated that teacher-perceived school leadership was significantly and positively associated with all four professional capacities examined in the study. Specifically, school leadership demonstrated the strongest association with sustained professional-development engagement ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$), followed by professional agency ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), academic optimism ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), and perceived collective capacity ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$). The qualitative findings complemented these statistical relationships by showing that trust, professional recognition, teacher voice, collaborative structures, and developmental feedback enabled teachers to exercise informed professional judgment. However, curriculum centralization, examination pressure, workload, bureaucratic procedures, and insufficient resources restricted the extent to which leadership support could be translated into classroom practice. Together, the findings suggest that school leadership contributes to teacher development not simply by expressing support but by converting organizational resources into legitimate and actionable opportunities for professional practice.

The strongest quantitative association was observed between school leadership and sustained professional-development engagement. This finding indicates that teachers who perceived stronger leadership support were more likely to report active, collaborative, and continuing involvement in professional learning. Leadership may promote such engagement by identifying relevant learning priorities, protecting time for collaboration, providing developmental feedback, facilitating mentoring, and connecting professional development to instructional needs. The qualitative accounts supported this explanation, as participants described meaningful professional learning as more likely when leaders treated development as an ongoing process rather than as attendance at isolated workshops. This finding is consistent with the view that professional-

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development engagement includes cognitive investment, collaboration, reflection, and application, not merely participation in scheduled activities (Kelly et al., 2022). It also aligns with evidence that principal commitment can be translated into practical professional-development structures when leaders provide organizational support and connect learning activities to teachers' classroom responsibilities (Tran et al., 2021).

The association between leadership and professional-development engagement can also be explained through the enabling and networked functions of the LENS framework. Enabling leadership creates access to time, feedback, materials, mentoring, and relevant learning opportunities, whereas networked leadership connects teachers with colleagues and organizes professional knowledge across the school. Such conditions help transform professional learning from an individual activity into a socially supported process. Research on language teacher leadership similarly demonstrates that teachers' professional influence and learning extend beyond individual classrooms when schools provide collaborative networks and legitimate opportunities for participation (Reinders et al., 2025). Furthermore, intervention-oriented research suggests that professional learning becomes more effective when it identifies and addresses the systemic contradictions that restrict teachers' agency during curriculum reform (Dinh & Sannino, 2024). Therefore, the present result implies that professional development is sustained when leaders coordinate learning with organizational conditions that permit new knowledge to be tested, refined, and incorporated into practice.

The second strongest relationship was found between teacher-perceived leadership and professional agency. This result suggests that leadership is closely associated with teachers' perceptions of their ability to exercise instructional judgment, initiate pedagogical changes, adapt teaching to learner needs, reflect on practice, and participate in professional decisions. From an ecological perspective, this finding is theoretically expected because agency is not an isolated personal characteristic; rather, it is achieved through the interaction of teachers' professional histories, purposes, relationships, and contextual resources (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). Leadership can expand the conditions for agency by recognizing teachers' expertise, inviting their participation, legitimizing responsible adaptation, and protecting them when innovations do not produce immediate results. The qualitative findings reinforced this interpretation by showing that trust and recognition increased teachers' willingness to use informed judgment, whereas excessive monitoring and procedural rigidity reduced initiative.

The findings also support the argument that teachers' beliefs influence agency but become consequential only under enabling conditions. Teachers may believe in communicative instruction, formative assessment, differentiated teaching, or professional collaboration, yet their ability to enact those beliefs depends on the opportunities and constraints of the school environment (Biesta et al., 2015). Recent measurement research has similarly conceptualized agency as multidimensional, encompassing instructional decision-making, professional development, collaboration, influence, and the capacity to respond to contextual conditions (Leijen et al., 2024). EFL-specific instruments have further demonstrated that ecological agency includes interactions among individual capabilities, interpersonal relations, and institutional affordances (Ghamoushi et al., 2022). Consequently, the positive relationship found in the present study should not be interpreted as evidence that leaders simply "give" agency to teachers. Rather, leadership appears to contribute to the relational and organizational environment through which agency can be achieved.

The results are particularly relevant to curriculum reform and assessment in centralized EFL systems. Iranian teachers often work between reform-oriented pedagogical expectations and institutional pressures favoring curriculum coverage and examination preparation. Previous research has shown that Iranian EFL teachers negotiate curriculum reform by drawing on professional experience while responding to administrative expectations, prescribed materials, and contextual constraints (Rezaee & Seyri, 2021). Assessment agency is likewise strengthened through professional education, but contextual opportunities remain decisive in determining whether teachers can implement assessment knowledge (Estaji, 2024). The current qualitative findings concerning examination pressure, parental expectations, and principal oversight closely correspond with evidence that the Konkur, principals, and parents jointly shape novice teachers' assessment decisions (Mirsanjari, 2026b). They also agree with findings that Iranian EFL teachers negotiate high-stakes testing through strategic adaptation and ecological assessment literacy while remaining constrained by time, infrastructure, and institutional accountability (Mirsanjari, 2026a).

Teacher-perceived leadership was also positively associated with academic optimism. This finding means that teachers reporting more supportive leadership tended to

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express stronger confidence in their faculty's ability to support learning, greater trust in school relationships, and a stronger emphasis on academic achievement. Academic optimism represents a collective orientation in which academic emphasis, relational trust, and perceived collective efficacy reinforce one another (Hoy et al., 2006). Leaders may strengthen this orientation by communicating coherent goals, maintaining realistic expectations, recognizing effort, supporting teachers during instructional difficulties, and establishing a shared responsibility for student learning. The interview findings suggested that recognition and developmental feedback were particularly important because they enabled teachers to interpret instructional challenges as problems that could be addressed collectively rather than as personal failures.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that academic optimism should not be treated as unconditional positivity. Teachers' confidence and academic commitment can be sustained only when organizational expectations are accompanied by workable conditions. If leaders emphasize high achievement while failing to address excessive workload, limited resources, or contradictory assessment requirements, academic optimism may become rhetorical rather than operational. Successful leadership is influential precisely because it aligns organizational direction with staff development and supportive working conditions (Leithwood et al., 2008). Similarly, leadership practices that focus closely on teaching and teacher learning have stronger implications for educational outcomes than leadership that remains detached from instructional processes (Robinson et al., 2008). The present findings therefore suggest that academic optimism emerges when leaders combine ambitious instructional purposes with trust, coordination, and credible organizational support.

The positive relationship between leadership and perceived collective capacity further indicates that teachers' beliefs about their faculty's shared capability are connected to how leadership is experienced. Leaders can strengthen perceived collective capacity by establishing common goals, distributing relevant responsibilities, creating opportunities for joint planning, and making teachers' expertise visible to colleagues. The qualitative findings showed that collaborative structures were especially important because they allowed teachers to exchange strategies, coordinate responses to instructional problems, and recognize that expertise existed within the school. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that teacher leadership can sustain pedagogical innovation under contextual constraints when professional expertise is mobilized collectively (Nguyen et al., 2025). It also accords with capability-oriented scholarship in which leadership converts organizational conditions into teachers' real opportunities to provide responsive education (Kostogriz et al., 2026).

However, perceived collective capacity must remain conceptually distinct from collective agency. The survey captured teachers' perceptions of shared faculty capability, whereas collective agency would require evidence that teachers actually coordinated their actions and influenced school practices. A faculty can believe that it is capable without possessing sufficient time, authority, or organizational coordination to act collectively. This distinction reflects the study's broader argument that authorization and enactment are not equivalent. Multilevel mediation models are needed to determine whether leadership practices operate at the school level, whether shared perceptions can be aggregated, and whether collective processes mediate teacher- and student-level outcomes (Preacher et al., 2010). Thus, the present association should be interpreted as a teacher-level relationship that supports further multilevel investigation rather than as definitive evidence of a school-level causal effect.

The qualitative results clarify how the four quantitative relationships may arise through the LENS conversion mechanisms. Language-specific instructional understanding enables leaders to recognize the pedagogical reasoning behind EFL teachers' decisions concerning interaction, assessment, materials, and pacing. Enabling professional conditions provide teachers with time, resources, feedback, and access to learning. Networked professional structures connect teachers' expertise through mentoring, collaborative planning, and shared problem-solving. System-facing policy mediation involves interpreting external requirements, clarifying decision rights, communicating with authorities, and protecting defensible adaptations. These leadership functions operate through legitimacy, access, coordination, and protection, thereby influencing whether teachers experience both professional authorization and actionable professional space.

This explanation is supported by research showing that instructional leadership influences EFL teachers' planning and implementation when leaders understand and engage with the instructional object of curriculum innovation (Chien, 2026). It is also compatible with the micropolitical finding that teachers' identities and professional actions are shaped by recognition, power relations, and access to

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influence within the school (Tran-Thanh, 2024). The present findings consequently suggest that generic supportive leadership may be insufficient in formal EFL settings. Leaders need enough language-program knowledge to identify justified pedagogical adaptation, understand the effects of high-stakes assessment on instruction, and recognize when specialist teacher expertise should carry greater weight in organizational decisions.

The findings additionally support the policy-enactment dimension of the framework. Schools do not implement external policy mechanically; instead, organizational actors interpret, prioritize, translate, and embed policy in local routines (Ball et al., 2012). In the present study, bureaucracy, centralized curricula, and examination pressure were not merely background characteristics. They shaped the practical meaning of leadership support and established boundaries around teachers' professional action. This pattern corresponds with previous descriptions of Iranian mainstream EFL education as an environment shaped simultaneously by pedagogical, societal, and governmental policy forces (Gholaminejad & Raeisi-Vanani, 2021). It also supports the distinction between formal curriculum autonomy and the professional conditions necessary to make flexibility usable (Oecd, 2024). Leaders may be unable to remove system-level constraints, but they can influence how requirements are interpreted, scheduled, communicated, and monitored.

One of the study's principal theoretical contributions is the identification of a possible agency bottleneck. Interviewees sometimes described being trusted, encouraged, or consulted while lacking the time, resources, procedural flexibility, or institutional protection necessary to enact their professional judgments. This configuration represents high professional authorization combined with limited actionable professional space. Under such conditions, empowerment may become symbolic, and teachers may gradually reduce initiative despite positive leadership messages. The bottleneck should be understood as a configuration of organizational conditions rather than as an individual deficiency. Because mismatch hypotheses cannot be adequately tested through simple difference scores, subsequent research should employ polynomial regression and response-surface analysis to investigate combinations of authorization and actionable space (Nestler et al., 2019).

Taken together, the findings support the conceptual separation of the four CAPS outcomes. Professional agency concerns intentional professional action; perceived collective capacity concerns beliefs about faculty capability; academic optimism integrates trust, collective confidence, and academic emphasis; and sustained professional-development engagement concerns active and continuing participation in learning. Their relationships with leadership were uniformly positive, but the qualitative evidence indicated partially different mechanisms. Agency was particularly associated with voice, legitimacy, and protection; collective capacity with collaboration and coordination; academic optimism with trust, recognition, and shared purpose; and professional-development engagement with access, relevance, feedback, and protected time. Keeping these outcomes distinct is important for theoretical precision and measurement validity. Before comparisons are made across teacher groups or contexts, future studies should also establish measurement invariance to ensure that differences reflect substantive variation rather than unequal measurement properties (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

This study has several limitations. The quantitative strand was cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish temporal precedence or causal relationships between leadership and the four professional capacities. All principal variables were reported by teachers, increasing the possibility of common-method variance and perceptual consistency effects. Participants were recruited from accessible public and private schools in one district of Tehran, which restricts generalizability to other Iranian regions, school levels, or national systems. School identifiers were not retained, preventing the separation of teacher-level and school-level variance. The use of theoretically guided parcels may have concealed item-level misspecification, and mean substitution for limited missing responses may have underestimated uncertainty. The qualitative sample provided explanatory depth but cannot establish the prevalence of the identified mechanisms. Translation of Persian interviews into English may also have reduced some contextual nuance. Finally, the LENS functions, conversion mechanisms, authorization–space distinction, CAPS profile, and agency bottleneck remain theoretically derived propositions rather than jointly validated latent structures.

Future research should validate the framework through multisite, longitudinal, multilevel, and multisource designs. Researchers should collect data from teachers, leaders, school documents, observations, and professional-learning records across several educational regions and retain school identifiers to distinguish individual perceptions from shared organizational properties. A three-wave design could

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examine whether leadership conditions precede changes in authorization, actionable space, and CAPS outcomes. New measures of the LENS functions and conversion mechanisms should undergo expert review, cognitive interviewing, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, and tests of reliability, discriminant validity, and equivalence across school sectors and teacher groups. The proposed agency bottleneck should be tested through polynomial regression and response-surface analysis. Future qualitative sampling could compare high-authorization/high-space, high-authorization/low-space, low-authorization/high-space, and low-authorization/low-space schools. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies could also evaluate whether protected collaborative planning, language-program leadership training, mentoring systems, or policy-translation teams improve professional capacity over time.

School leaders should move beyond general encouragement by creating concrete conditions in which EFL teachers can use professional judgment. They should protect time for collaborative planning, provide developmental rather than punitive feedback, clarify which instructional decisions teachers may adapt, facilitate access to relevant materials and mentoring, and involve teachers in decisions affecting curriculum and assessment. Leaders should develop sufficient understanding of language teaching to evaluate proposed adaptations fairly and recognize the effects of examination pressure on instruction. Schools should establish stable professional networks through peer observation, mentoring, shared assessment review, and collaborative problem-solving. Leaders should also identify whether teacher initiatives are being obstructed by lack of legitimacy, access, coordination, or protection and address the relevant barrier directly. Policymakers should reduce unnecessary reporting demands, clarify areas of permissible local adaptation, and provide realistic resources so that professional responsibility is accompanied by genuine opportunities for enactment.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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