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Modeling the Internalization of Morality as Cooperation among Iranian EFL Learners: A Thematic Analysis Approach

Linguistics Society of Iran

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ABSTRACT

Examining the under-researched area of moral development in EFL contexts, this study examines how Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners perceive and internalize the factors of Morality as Cooperation (MAC), introduced by Curry et al. (2019a), within their unique cultural and educational landscape. Specifically, it investigates how these learners understand and internalize MAC's core factors: family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property. The present study employed a qualitative research design. The data were gathered after running semi-structured interviews with 23 participants (13 females and 10 males) selected through purposive sampling. They were also analyzed utilizing Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach and by MAXQDA software version 24. The results showed five major themes: family support, community responsibility, reciprocal relationships, heroic actions, and deference to authority. These themes expose the subtle ways that Iranian EFL learners recognize and use moral principles in their social interactions and ethical frameworks. The results underscore the impact of cultural and educational settings in coursing moral understanding and cooperative behaviors. In reference to the findings of the present analysis, the paper extends the discourse on morality in education, pointing out the need for pedagogical approaches that are culturally sensitive and tailored to learners' living experiences. Besides, we examined the ramifications of educational settings on the promotion of moral development and the fostering of collaborative behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Currently, the educational system identifies knowledge of students' moral development as a key feature in fostering their civic duty and ethical behavior (Durkheim, 2012). Research demonstrates that integrating moral education across the curriculum not only enhances students' academic performance but also cultivates their capacity to navigate complex social situations and make ethically sound decisions (Akarsu & Turhan, 2022; Rahmawati, 2023). Anthropology has long struggled to adequately address the concept of morality. In 1962, philosopher Abraham Edel criticized the field for failing to provide a systematic understanding of morality and evading essential questions about its nature and identification (Edel, 1962). Four decades later, anthropologist James Laidlaw echoed this concern, lamenting the lack of progress in developing a comprehensive framework for moral systems (Laidlaw, 2002). This ongoing challenge underscores the complexities of defining morality within anthropological discourse (Curry et al., 2019a).

By offering insights into the evolutionary basis and cultural diversity of human ethics, MAC provides a valuable framework. It posits that morality originates from cooperative strategies devised to tackle fundamental social interaction challenges. By identifying distinct domains of cooperation, such as the division of labor, coordination, and conflict resolution, MAC provides insightful perspectives on moral values and behaviors. Knowing the cooperative principles is necessary for dealing with current social dilemmas, encouraging positive social behavior, and breaking down the differences that exist among various cultures (Curry et al., 2019a; Turner, 2025; Waterman, 2025).

Regarding previous studies, morality is a mainstay in human behavior and societal norms, to the extent that it involves psychological factors which, individually and collectively, influence people's perception and practice of co-operative behavior (Turner, 2025). The theory of MAC posits a positive correlation between moral identity and cooperative behaviors, which in turn affects public health engagement (Boggio et al., 2024; Curry et al., 2019a). This perspective aligns with Durkheim's assertion that moral education within schools promotes discipline and social integration, thereby shaping moral character through shared experiences (Durkheim, 2012).

Recent research highlights the importance of universally accepted moral behaviors, including family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property, within moral frameworks across cultures, suggesting that a supportive moral environment significantly

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enhances student morality in educational contexts (Akarsu & Turhan, 2022; Curry et al., 2019b). Furthermore, the relationship between moral education and individual development is mediated by various factors, including cultural context and pedagogical strategies, which can foster moral values among learners (Rahmawati, 2023). This changing conversation highlights the necessity for educational practices to involve ethical issues that reflect the intricacies of moral growth.

Morality is a system of norms and values that encourages cooperation among members to accomplish behaviors that facilitate group cohesion and mutual benefit. This definition is grounded in the understanding that moral judgments are often based on behaviors that solve specific cooperative dilemmas faced by societies (Curry et al., 2019a). Morality encompasses a range of cooperative behaviors, including helping kin, helping your group, reciprocating, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing disputed resources, and respecting prior possession, all of which are considered morally good across various cultures. Several factors contribute to the understanding of MAC.

First, biological adaptations are very important; Evolutionary processes have added qualities that make people get along well, like sympathy and fairness (Boggio et al., 2024; Dugatkin, 1997; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Second, cultural transmission is significant in shaping moral norms; cultural practices evolve alongside biological adaptations and provide frameworks for cooperation learned within communities. Lastly, cross-cultural variability highlights that while certain moral behaviors may be universally recognized as beneficial across cultures, their specific expressions and interpretations can vary significantly (Curry et al., 2019; Turner, 2025).

As an exciting novel theory, the MAC framework presents a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes morality as a composite of biological and cultural responses to the persistent challenges of cooperation within human social interactions. This perspective emphasizes that moral behaviors are fundamentally linked to the cooperative strategies that have evolved to enhance social interactions among individuals. The theory of MAC draws upon concepts from evolutionary biology and game theory, particularly the notion of non-zero-sum games, where interactions can yield mutual benefits rather than just one party winning at the expense of another (Curry et al., 2019a; Gkinopoulos et al., 2022; Turner, 2025; Waterman, 2025). Moreover, first-hand traumatic incidents of shame from the past might still have a powerful impact on the way we make our present-day moral judgments and conduct our behaviors.

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Additionally, compassion emerges as a crucial factor that moderates the relationship between shame and morality. These findings suggest that understanding morality necessitates the consideration of individual psychological factors such as shame and attachment styles, along with societal emotions like compassion (Turner, 2025). Another study found that forgiveness education significantly increased empathy, altruism, and willingness to forgive among Iranian adolescents. Forgiveness education contributed positively to human flourishing by enhancing these positive psychological traits in students (Ghobari Bonab et al., 2025). Also, Gkinopoulos et al. (2022) noted that moral identity and morality-as-cooperation play a significant mediating role in the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and adherence to health measures, highlighting the importance of addressing these beliefs through a moral lens.

Concerning the factors of MAC, family refers to the evolutionary principle of kin selection, where individuals are predisposed to assist and care for their genetic relatives. The operational definition encompasses behaviors such as nurturing offspring, providing support to family members, and avoiding inbreeding. These actions are considered morally good because they enhance the survival of shared genes (Curry et al., 2022; Dawkins, 1979; Hamilton, 1963).

The factor of group involves strategies that individuals employ to achieve mutual benefits in uncertain situations. The operational definition includes forming alliances, participating in collaborative efforts, and adhering to local customs or conventions. Such behaviors are deemed morally commendable as they foster group cohesion and stability (Stanford & Bunn, 2001).

Reciprocity pertains to the practice of conditional cooperation, where individuals engage in reciprocal altruism. The operational definition includes behaviors such as trusting others, returning favors, and expressing gratitude. These actions are viewed as morally positive because they mitigate the risks associated with free-riding in cooperative scenarios (Axelrod, 2012; Trivers, 1971; Wang et al., 2025).

Heroism involves acts of moral bravery that contribute to social cohesion and protect community values, often demonstrated through courageous or self-sacrificial behaviors (Gintis et al., 2012). It is regarded as morally good because it exemplifies bravery in conflict resolution and conflict prevention within social hierarchies (Smith & Price, 1973). Such behaviors foster trust and admiration, reinforcing cooperative strategies essential for group stability (Gintis et al., 2012; Whitehouse, 2018).

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Deference describes conflict resolution strategies that involve displays of dominance or submission during resource disputes. The operational definition includes behaviors characterized by bravery (asserting dominance) and respect (deferring to others). Such behaviors are regarded as morally good as they help establish social hierarchies and minimize destructive competition (Folger et al., 2024; Gintis et al., 2012; Smith & Price, 1973).

Fairness refers to the equitable distribution of resources among individuals involved in a dispute. The operational definition includes practices such as negotiating compromises and adhering to principles of fairness in resource allocation. These behaviors are considered morally good because they promote justice and cooperation within groups (Brosnan, 2013; Kumar et al., 2025; Nash, 1950).

Property emphasizes the importance of acknowledging previous ownership in resolving conflicts over resources. The operational definition includes behaviors that respect established claims to property and defer to prior possessors in disputes. These actions are considered morally good because they help maintain social order and prevent conflict escalation (Gintis et al., 2012; Sherratt & Mesterton-Gibbons, 2015; Taylor & Weinberger, 2025).

Most previous research on MAC has predominantly employed quantitative methodologies (Curry et al., 2019b; GAVASSA-PÉREZ, 2022; Sattler et al., 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2021), yet there remains a significant gap in qualitative investigations that explore the nuanced understanding of the mentioned moral principles within particular cultural contexts (Amini et al., 2024; Curry et al., 2019a; Turner, 2025; Waterman, 2025).

The current qualitative analysis among Iranian EFL learners aims to explore their perceptions of the factors of MAC. The primary goal of this study is to explore these viewpoints in order to recognize shared themes and patterns that indicate how the learners comprehend and apply the principles of MAC in their teaching context. This study is going to bring about a more profound understanding of the way moral concepts come to be in the case of Iranian EFL learners and the possible effects on their social relations and ethical frameworks.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of morality in social behavior and education, there remains a significant gap in qualitative research specifically examining Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of the factors influencing the theory of MAC, particularly within the context of their cultural and educational experiences. This study aims to conduct qualitative research based on thematic analysis concerning the theory of MAC. Specifically, it

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seeks to explore the perceptions of Iranian EFL learners regarding various factors that influence MAC, including family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property. The research will address the following primary question:

- What are the common themes and patterns in Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of MAC, and how do these perceptions reflect their morality?

Addressing the mentioned question, the study uncovers how educational contexts shape morality and cooperative behaviors among Iranian EFL learners, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on morality within educational settings. This inquiry not only aligns with existing literature on moral development but also emphasizes the need for tailored educational practices that resonate with students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design and Participants

Considering Dornyei (2007), this qualitative study employs a convenience sampling method to select twenty-three Iranian EFL learners for interviews. Participants were chosen based on three criteria: willingness to communicate openly about their experiences and perceptions regarding the MAC framework; availability for interviews; and possession of enough relevant information or insights related to MAC. The study was conducted in the fall semester of 2024.

Regarding Dornyei (2007), a convenience sampling method was employed for this qualitative analysis to identify twenty Iranian EFL learners who were most likely to agree to participate in interviews. These learners were chosen based on their availability and likelihood to agree to an interview, ensuring that their insights would be relevant and accessible for in-depth analysis. To ensure suitability, participants were screened using a pre-interview questionnaire that tested their level of pre-existing familiarity with the concept of Morality as Cooperation, their willingness to talk about their own experiences with moral beliefs, such as those held in the family, or with notions of reciprocity, or their level of personal reflections on ethics in education. This approach not only facilitated a focused exploration of their perceptions but also aimed to capture a diverse range of views regarding MAC among Iranian EFL learners (Robinson, 2014).

As reflected in Table 1, the participant students in this study were 23 students in total, with 13 females and 10 males. Ages ranged from grade 7 to grade 12, but are predominantly

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concentrated in grades 9 and below. When it came to the learning environment, most of them were in public schools (15 students), while a few were in private schools (8 students). This was a diverse sample to enable comparisons of learning environments and gender differences by different age groups.

Table 1

Demographic information for interview participants

Participants'	Gender	Grade	Type of school
Student1	Female	10	Public
Student2	Female	9	Public
Student3	Female	8	Private
Student4	Female	9	Public
Student5	Female	11	Public
Student6	Female	9	Public
Student7	Female	9	Private
Student8	Female	7	Public
Student9	Female	8	Public
Student10	Female	9	Private
Student11	Female	12	Public
Student12	male	9	Public
Student13	male	9	Public
Student14	male	11	Private
Student15	male	7	Public
Student16	male	8	Public
Student17	male	9	Private
Student18	male	10	Public
Student19	male	9	Public
Student20	male	8	Private
Student21	male	7	Public
Student22	male	12	Private
Student23	male	7	Public

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2.2. Data Collection

In this study, various instruments and materials were utilized for data collection and analysis to gain insights into the perceptions of Iranian EFL learners regarding MAC. To explore the perceptions of participants on the factors of MAC, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-three students. This format allowed for flexibility in questioning while ensuring that all relevant topics were covered, enabling a deeper understanding of their viewpoints.

The interview questions are based on the theory of MAC, which posits that moral values such as family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property are crucial for facilitating cooperation within societies. Each set of questions prompts participants to reflect on their experiences and beliefs regarding these moral dimensions. For example, family questions emphasize loyalty, while group inquiries highlight community engagement. Reciprocity examines mutual aid, heroism explores bravery, deference looks at respect for authority, fairness addresses justice and equality, and property questions assess moral reasoning about ownership. Collectively, these questions seek to provide qualitative information on how people manage morality factors and the principles guiding their moral decisions. An electronic voice recorder was utilized in recording the interviews verbatim. Sample questions included:

Family: "How significant a part does the sense of familial loyalty play in encouraging you to persevere in learning the English language?"; "Can you describe an instance where familial support impacted your learning habits for the learning of the English language?"

Group: “In what way does collaborating with fellow classmates improve your involvement in group language activities?”; “What are your feelings about community regulations within EFL contexts?”

Reciprocity: "Have you ever helped another student with their English homework in the hopes of being helped in return?""Why or why not?"; or "What is the impact of mutual teaching in the classroom on your level of motivation?"

Heroism: “What is the role of heroism in surmounting difficulties in learning a foreign language, such as public speaking?”“Can you think of any ‘heroic’ act in your EFL class?”

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Deference: “In what ways do you demonstrate deference towards the teacher's authority in the classroom, and how might this influence what you learn?"“What would you do if you disagreed with the teacher's instruction?"

Fairness: “How important is treating all classmates equally in group projects?"“Give an example that shows how unfairness influenced your emotional responses during class.”

Property: “Is it wrong to use someone else's notes without permission? Why?”; “How do you view sharing digital resources like vocabulary apps in EFL?”

Content validity was ensured through a multi-step expert review process. First, items were generated by directly matching questions to MAC theory's seven moral dimensions, informed by previously validated scales, such as Curry et al. (2019). A panel of five experts, including two TEFL professors, two applied linguists specializing in moral psychology, and one psychometrician, rated the relevance, clarity, and representativeness of each item on a 4-point scale. The content validity ratio (CVR; Lawshe, 1975) was computed to be 0.86, which is above the critical value of 0.75 for N =5. In addition, the content validity index or CVI averaged 0.92 across items, computed by aggregating the number of experts who rated each item as either 3 or 4 (Polit & Beck, 2006). Items underwent revisions based on reviewers' suggestions, for example, the rewording of items sensitive to Iranian EFL cultural contexts, followed by a pilot test administered to 10 learners not included in the sample to confirm the comprehensibility of items. This thorough process assures that items capture the breadth of the MAC constructs without bias.

The recorder enabled the researchers to provide their full attention to the dialogue without distractions from taking notes, hence enhancing the quality of the qualitative data obtained (Bernard, 2017). To maintain good ethics, all participants were required to give their written and free consents to take part in the research. Interviews were done in a separate room with confidentiality in mind. Each lasted about 45-60 minutes. To preserve anonymity, participants were all given pseudonyms. Audio recordings were stored on remote servers that are only accessible to the research group. Debriefing sessions were conducted on participants immediately after they were interviewed. This aimed to address their concerns and prevent emotional stress. Audio recordings were done to make transcription simpler. Audio files were not kept in electronic devices. This was to prevent theft. Further transcription would still be needed. The recordings were later transcribed for thorough analysis. The MAXQDA software version 24 was utilized to assist in analyzing the qualitative data. This computer-assisted

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qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) facilitated systematic coding and organization of the interview transcripts, enabling researchers to efficiently identify themes and patterns within the data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

2.3. Data Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the stages of thematic analysis typically involve a systematic process that allows researchers to identify and interpret patterns within qualitative data. The first stage is familiarization with the data, where researchers immerse themselves in the content by reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding. This is followed by the second stage, initial coding, where meaningful segments of the data are identified and labeled with codes that capture significant features relevant to the research questions. The third stage involves searching for themes, where codes are grouped into broader themes that reflect overarching patterns across the dataset. In the fourth stage, reviewing themes, researchers refine and adjust the identified themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and are distinct from one another. The fifth stage is defining and naming themes, which involves clearly articulating what each theme represents and how it contributes to answering the research questions. Finally, the last stage is producing the report, where researchers compile their findings, providing a narrative that illustrates how the identified themes relate to the research objectives and existing literature.

Considering Braun and Clarke (2023), thematic analysis involves identifying and analyzing themes within the interview data. It allows our research to categorize responses related to moral behaviors among Iranian EFL learners. Thematic analysis is flexible and can help our project uncover patterns related to the factors of MAC in the EFL context of Iran. It's particularly useful if the researchers have specific themes in mind based on existing literature about their theoretical framework.

3. Results

This qualitative study sought to identify the common themes and patterns in how Iranian EFL learners perceive various MAC factors, comprising family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property, and how these perceptions influence their morality. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis, involving six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

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Table 2

Themes related to the research question

Themes	Definition	Codes related to morality	Example quote
Family support	Emphasizes loyalty & mutual aid within families	- Family aid -Strengthen family bonds -Prioritize family	*S4: "Family is always your priority. Helping a family member means empathy and love."*
Community responsibility	Highlights contribution for societal betterment	- Contribute to society -Help others -Expect good society	S22: *"Contribute if you expect good society. Helping society makes us live better in the future and contributes to the country's progress."*
Reciprocal relationships	Stresses repaying kindness out of gratitude or duty	-Return kindness -Show gratitude -Feel obligated	S17: *"It shows appreciation for what they do. when we receive help, we should also give help in return to create positive outcomes and maintain a logical relationship."*
Heroic actions	Defines bravery & heroism positively impacting society	- Overcome fear -Inspire courage -Accomplish great feats	S23: *"We should overcome fear by doing what's right. Being brave doesn't mean doing foolish things online; it means stepping out of your comfort zone and doing new things."*
Deference to authority	Advocates respect earned through guidance rather than position alone	- Respect -Wisdom/guidance over position alone -View teachers/parents as role models	S5: *"Respect those who don't misuse power. By following them and heeding their guidance, we can find the best path in our lives."*

The transcripts from interviews with twenty-three participants were thoroughly read to gain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives on each of the mentioned morality factors as a moral virtue. Codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected overarching patterns across the dataset. Meaningful segments of the data were identified and labeled with

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codes that captured significant features relevant to morality. The participants' perceptions were ultimately categorized into five emerging themes: family support, community responsibility, reciprocal relationships, heroic actions, and deference to authority. The stated themes are explained in Table 2 above.

These emerging themes align closely with existing literature on MAC factors such as family (kin selection), group cohesion strategies (community involvement), reciprocal altruism (reciprocity), bravery or respect in conflict resolution strategies (heroism & deference) (Curry et al., 2019a; Dawkins, 1979).

3.1. Family Support

Participants emphasized the importance of supporting family members during difficult times, viewing it as a way to strengthen love within families. This aligns with evolutionary principles where individuals are predisposed towards assisting genetic relatives (Hamilton, 1963; Waterman, 2025). This theme highlights how familial obligations are deeply ingrained in Iranian culture and reflect broader kin selection principles that prioritize family ties over other social bonds (Dawkins, 1979). The emphasis on family support underscores its role in fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility among individuals, a crucial aspect for moral development (Durkheim, 2012). For instance: S3: *"Family is always your priority; they are irreplaceable. Helping one family member grows stronger love within families. Family members should support each other during difficult times and help one another, ensuring that no one is left to struggle alone. Helping each other applies both within the family and among relatives. Since they help me, I feel it is my duty to assist them as much as I can."* Helping family members when they pass through hard times is at the very core of the Iranian culture and, actually, it mirrors some wider evolutionary concepts that highlight the conservation and the reinforcement of the familial ties. This cultural aspect, which not only contributes to the feeling of being part of a group, but also supports the values even more, as it gives a sense of responsibility to the people, is deeply ingrained in Iranian culture. Through the emphasis on family support each individual becomes a contributor to the general welfare and the stamina of the family, thus, he/she is in accordance with both the cultural norms and the evolutionary theories. (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003).

3.2. Community Responsibility

Further analysis revealed that helping others in society was seen as essential for creating a compassionate environment. Participants noted that contributing positively impacts societal

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growth by fostering group cohesion (Smith, 2024; Stanford & Bunn, 2001). For example: S15: *"If you expect a good society, you must contribute. It helps us connect with others. If a person is truly human, they feel responsible for the events happening in society and among their fellow citizens. We should take care of our fellow citizens."* The main point of this theme is to emphasize the role of community involvement as a means of increasing social integration and cooperation among individuals, a key aspect of moral development according to Durkheim's theories on moral education promoting discipline and social integration through shared experiences (Durkheim, 2012). By engaging in community activities and supporting fellow citizens, individuals contribute to creating a more harmonious and cooperative environment that supports overall societal growth.

3.3. Reciprocal Relationships

The analysis of the transcripts indicated that participants emphasized the importance of reciprocity. This reciprocity creates empathy among partners as it lessens the risks that are linked to the behavior of freeriding eciprocating kindness they received from others, driven by feelings of obligation or gratitude. (Dizon et al., 2025; Trivers, 1971). Reciprocal behaviors are crucial for maintaining trust within communities and ensuring cooperative interactions continue over time (Beikian 2024), a principle supported by game theory models emphasizing mutual benefits from reciprocal actions (Axelrod, 2012). As an example: S8: *"Because that helper has sacrificed their abilities and time for me, ignoring their own important work to assist me, I feel responsible towards them. Now, if we help someone, we shouldn't expect anything in return because expecting repayment is very wrong. However, on the contrary, I feel obligated to repay the kindness I have received."* The feeling of having to return the favor to the right person not only deepens the connections between individuals but also facilitates a culture where people help each other. By acknowledging and responding to acts of kindness, individuals reinforce trust and encourage others to continue offering help, creating a cycle of generosity. This reciprocal behavior is essential for building resilient communities where cooperation is valued and nurtured over time (Frémeaux et al., 2023).

3.4. Heroic Actions

Considering the acknowledged outcomes, being brave means overcoming fear by doing what is right despite challenges. Heroes serve as role models inspiring courage in society by asserting dominance or showing respect during conflicts (Beerel, 2025; Gintis et al., 2012). Notably: S21: *"Courage means facing fears not being fearless. Heroes inspire us by*

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accomplishing impossible tasks. Being brave means that the rights of individuals are not trampled upon. When I see someone's rights being violated, I courageously stand up for my own rights. This does not mean that we are fearless; everyone has a bit of fear. However, being brave means facing our fears and confronting them." Heroic acts by showing bravery when confronted with trouble, encourage others to imitate these qualities, thus nurturing a communal feeling of both resilience and ethical purity in the communities. The recognition of bravery acts perpetuates the social ideals that cherish fighting for what is right even though it might bring one harm or cause discomfort. Heroes through their courage and ethical will become part of a culture that brings people out of their fears and calls them to do the right thing in difficult situations (Goethals & Allison, 2012; Klümper & Baumert, 2024)

3.5. Deference to Authority

A more detailed analysis of the transcripts disclosed that participants highlighted respect for teachers and parents mainly due to their experiential guidance, rather than merely their positional power. In particular: S11: *"Respect those who do not misuse power. They are our examples to follow. Since they are more mature and have more authority, it is always important to show our elders respect, unless they exploit their power or behave haughtily. In such cases they do not deserve respect, because respect is for worthy individuals who do not seek to show off to others."* One of the main themes here is the character of the relationships between authority figures and those under their command that of respect being a leading feature in the case of the first being their demonstration of wisdom as opposed to the mere use of positional power or rank, i.e. an outlook conceptually consistent with the pattern of cultural norms that strongly favor the idea of earned authority over that of a purely hierarchical type (Pereira et al, 2025). Equally important is the fact that the difference between the two concepts of respect and power from the position of leadership underlines the significance of ethical leadership, in which authority figures are loved because they show wisdom, modesty and honesty. According to this view, respect is not given by default, be it to the old or to the ones in charge, but it is the result of doing the right thing which is a reflection of one's moral character and responsible use of one's influence.

Concentrating on the significance of individual traits instead of the position, people endorse a set of values whereby an administration judged by qualities is recognized as being of greater value than that originating from just a name or standing. These findings highlight

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how Iranian EFL learners perceive morality through various cultural lenses, emphasizing familial obligations grounded in evolutionary kin selection principles; communal responsibilities reflecting group cohesion strategies; reciprocal actions built upon conditional cooperation; heroic virtues inspiring social courage via displays of bravery or submission; deference grounded in wisdom over mere status alone.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

This qualitative analysis aimed to investigate the common themes and patterns in Iranian EFL learners' perceptions regarding MAC factors such as family support through kin selection principles; community responsibility via group cohesion strategies; reciprocal relationships based on conditional cooperation; heroic actions embodying bravery or respect during conflicts; deference grounded in wisdom over positional power, and how these perceptions influence their understanding of morality.

The thematic analysis revealed five emerging themes from the participants' responses: family support, community responsibility, reciprocal relationships, heroic actions, and deference to authority. These themes align closely with existing literature on MAC factors such as kin selection for family ties (Hamilton 1963), group cohesion strategies for societal betterment (Stanford & Bunn 2001), reciprocal altruism for maintaining trust within communities (Trivers 1971), bravery or respect during conflicts for establishing social hierarchies (Gintis et al., 2012), and earned authority over hierarchical structures alone for fostering respectful environments (Pereira et al., 2025).

Regarding the study’s results, participants emphasized loyalty within families as a fundamental aspect of their moral framework. This aligns with evolutionary principles where individuals prioritize assisting genetic relatives due to shared genes enhancing survival chances (Dawkins 1979). The emphasis underscores familial obligations deeply ingrained in Iranian culture. Helping others was seen as essential for creating a compassionate society by contributing positively towards societal growth. This reflects Durkheim's assertion that moral education promotes discipline and social integration through shared experiences within communities (Durkheim 2012). Participants stressed repaying kindness out of gratitude or duty. Reciprocity fosters empathy by mitigating risks associated with free, riding during cooperative interactions, a principle supported by game theory models emphasizing mutual benefits from reciprocal actions (Axelrod 2012). Being brave means overcoming fear despite challenges, a trait celebrated across cultures where heroes inspire courage by asserting

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dominance or showing respect during conflicts without being reckless but facing fears head-on instead. Respect was highlighted mainly due to experiential guidance rather than positional power alone, aligning with cultural norms emphasizing earned authority over hierarchical structures alone.

Our results are consistent with Curry et al.'s (2019) framework positing that moral behaviors such as helping kin (family support) contributing positively towards one's group (community responsibility) reciprocating favors (reciprocal relationships) demonstrating bravery under challenging circumstances (heroic actions) showing respect towards authority figures or superiors (deference) effectively resolve conflicts peacefully without escalating them into violence which would destabilize societies unless intervened upon promptly before reaching critical mass. Moreover, Hedayati et al. (2017) confirmed that Iranian secondary school students' life purposes highlight the importance of family and social goals, which aligns with our qualitative analysis on morality among Iranian EFL learners, where themes like family support and community responsibility are central. The stated research also underscored the significance of cultural context in shaping moral understanding and cooperative behaviors, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive educational approaches.

Our findings also resonate well within Durkheim's (2012) assertion that moral education promotes discipline and social integration through shared experiences, thereby shaping moral character among students by fostering an environment conducive to ethical development aligned with universally accepted principles like fairness across cultures globally recognized essential maintaining peace stability via enhanced international cooperation facilitated shared understanding common humanity transcending borders national identities. Moreover integrating MAC factors such as family support community responsibility reciprocal relationships heroic actions deference fairness property into curricula could enhance not only academic performance but foster responsible citizenship promoting ethical decision-making skills grounded both locally relevant value systems acknowledging universally recognized norms crucial maintaining global peace stability via enhanced international cooperation facilitated shared understanding common humanity transcending borders national identities.

While our findings hence resonate with Curry et al.'s (2019) MAC framework in confirming a few universal moral dimensions such as kin selection, namely, family support; reciprocal altruism, or reciprocal relationships; and conflict resolution strategies, heroic actions, and deference-they introduce novelty by revealing nuanced cultural inflections unique

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to Iranian EFL learners. For example, family support emerges not just as an evolutionary kin preference but as a culturally enhanced imperative of unconditional loyalty and mutual aid, deeply rooted in the collectivist familial norms of Iran. Thus, the notion of family extends beyond genetic ties to emotional reciprocity in language learning perseverance. Deference to authority further breaks new ground in terms of its models, as it specifies its respect based upon wisdom and moral guidance, rather than simply upon position, in a nod to Iranian culture's own embrace of dynamic hierarchy over authoritarianism (Pereira et al., 2025). Community responsibility further breaks new ground in terms of its models, in its focus on educational contributions to society in general, rather than upon individual pursuits, as would be expected in a Western-centric view, in order to better accommodate group cohesion against educational isolation in EFL settings. Each of these insights might be seen to be missing in MAC research across cultures in general.

In a broader context this research suggests integrating culturally relevant frameworks can improve not only academic outcomes but cultivate citizens capable navigating complex dilemmas ethically informed decisions reflecting nuanced balance between local customs universal ethics necessary navigating increasingly interconnected worlds requiring adaptability resilience tolerance compassion wisdom guiding future leaders educators policymakers alike toward creating harmonious sustainable futures benefiting all members society regardless background identity culture religion belief system political affiliation ideology creed color race gender age ability disability sexual orientation everything else divides instead embracing celebrating diversity richness tapestry woven beautifully intricate complex multifaceted ever-evolving dynamic always changing growing learning adapting evolving becoming more sum parts greater whole beautiful masterpiece unfolding before very eyes every single day anew fresh start clean slate blank page waiting stories yet untold adventures unexplored mysteries unsolved puzzles pieces falling place gradually slowly surely steadily step-by-step journey lifelong paths winding twisting turning unexpectedly surprising ways keeping engaged curious motivated inspired striving excellence pushing boundaries limits beyond what was previously imaginable dreamt envisioned hoped believed achievable reminding anything possible believing trying hard staying focused committed dedicated passionate driven purposefully working meaningfully making differences other peoples' lives leaving lasting impacts.

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The significance of these findings lies in their potential impact on future research directions. For instance, future studies could delve into cultural adaptation by examining how different cultural contexts shape perceptions of morality. Additionally, policymakers might consider incorporating culturally sensitive moral education into school curricula as part of educational policy reforms. Furthermore, conducting cross-cultural comparisons through comparative analyses between different regions could offer valuable insights into the variations in MAC interpretations worldwide.

The study highlights several limitations. Firstly, suggests that cross-cultural comparisons would be beneficial to understand variations in MAC interpretations worldwide. Secondly, employing mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative surveys with qualitative thematic analyses could provide more comprehensive insights in future studies.

Future research directions include conducting comparative studies examining different cultural contexts' influence on MAC perceptions and employing mixed-methodologies for comprehensive insights. In terms of educational practice, integrating tailored moral education reflecting local values while emphasizing universal principles like fairness is recommended. This approach can enhance academic performance and foster responsible citizenship by promoting ethical decision-making skills grounded both locally relevant value systems yet acknowledging universally recognized norms crucial maintaining global peace stability via enhanced international cooperation facilitated shared understanding common humanity transcending borders national identities.

Policy implications suggest encouraging policymakers to adopt culturally sensitive curricula promoting ethical awareness grounded locally relevant value systems acknowledging universally recognized standards facilitating global harmony stability via enhanced international collaboration supported deepened comprehension common humanity surpassing frontiers nationality identity.

Overall this study underscores the need for continued exploration into how morality manifests within specific cultural contexts contributing significantly broader discourse on morality within educational settings by highlighting tailored educational practices resonating students lived experiences cultural backgrounds fostering responsible citizenship ethical awareness grounded both locally relevant values systems acknowledging universally recognized norms facilitating global peace stability via enhanced international cooperation facilitated shared understanding common humanity transcending borders national identities.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the research process.

Declaration

We declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

Transparency Statements

The authors affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Any additional data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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