Tarbiat Modares
University

Insights into Moral Education: Iranian English Teachers' Conception of Morality

Azar Hosseini Fatemi[1], Neda Moezzipour[2]*, & Behzad Ghonsooly[3]

Abstract
The present study attempted to look deeply into how Iranian English teachers defined morality and if there was any significant difference with respect to gender and years of teaching experience. The study followed a mixed-methods design including a semi-structured interview and a multiple choice single-item questionnaire. The results revealed that while the main concern for the participants in different decades of teaching was choosing right over wrong, the prevailing theme for male and female teachers differed in that the male teachers moved towards less personalized and more agentic conceptions, whereas female teachers were more concerned with the context and society as their experience increased. The analysis of the quantitative data also illustrated there was a significant difference between female and male teachers in the 2nd and 3rd decades of teaching. Moreover, the differences between participants based on their level of experience were statistically significant.

[1] Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashahd, Mashhad, Iran; *Email: hfatemi@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir*
[2] Corresponding Author: Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashahd, Mashhad, Iran; *neda.moezzipour@gmail.com*
[3] Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashahd, Mashhad, Iran; *ghonsooly@um.ac.ir*

1. Introduction

Concern over what is right and what is wrong has always served as a hot topic for philosophical quests, and thus different theories (e.g., virtue ethics, deontological, consequential) have been proposed to mold the concept and dig its essence (May, 2019). Along with efforts to delve into the depth of morality, there has always existed a perennial interest in moral education, as to what it means and how to engage in it (Barrow, 2007). Although the issue as to whether to incorporate teaching morality in education or to avoid an inculpatory approach is still disputable, the link between morality and teaching has long been established at least since Plato wrote about Meno's inquiry which addressed if virtue is acquired by teaching, practice, or comes to man by nature (Sanger, 2003). Notwithstanding the yet unsettled dispute, the role that teachers could play as moral educators in shaping the students' characters was later on attested by Locke (1693/2000), Dewey (1909/1975), and most skeptically by Nietzsche (1887/1967).

Traditional views deemed the transmission of knowledge as the main task of teaching. The profession was considered an applied science and improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning was theretofore taken to be the central point of focus in the educational sphere (Tom, 1980). Nonetheless, the moral aspects of teaching were almost completely overshadowed by "the cognitive theories connected to teaching and learning, effective approaches to measurement and assessment, classroom management strategies, and other aspects that, while naturally important, are rarely viewed from a moral or ethical perspective" (Campbell, 2008, p. 358).

Although hitherto neglected, the moral dimension of teaching rebounded with fiercer potency. Now, fortunately, the profession has gone beyond the restricting borders of traditional accounts in that teaching, viewed in a different light, is now seen as a moral enterprise. This new account adds weight to morality of teaching by reckoning the practitioner's role not just as the source of knowledge or a moral educator but as a moral agent whose responsibility goes far beyond.

English language teaching (ELT) is no exception from this pervasive rule that teaching is a moral enterprise. According to Johnston (2003), language teaching and learning are shot with values and teaching a language is profoundly a value-laden endeavor. Given the specific features of a language classroom as a place where two different cultures interface, the moral responsibility the language teacher is

endowed with as a moral agent seems to have significance in itself; cultures are imbued with values and "values in second language teaching are virtually by definition negotiated across cultural boundaries" (Johnston, 2003, p. 15).

Language is conceptualized as a tool for transferring ideologies (Lukin, 2017), and in classroom it is through language that the moral dimension of teaching is realized, the moral meaning is negotiated and the moral judgements are expressed (Johnston & Buzzelli, 2002). English is ubiquitous in various academic fields and serves as the interface between people and cultures (Pishghadam et al., 2021), thus ESL/EFL classroom "lends itself rather well to the dynamics of moral values" (Shaaban, 2005, p. 204). Therefore, the salience heightens when language is the means as well as the object of instruction. In addition, the type of materials used for instruction in language classrooms may impact the students' moral reasoning and moral judgment (Javadi Mehr et al., 2015). Furthermore, given that the teachers' role in classroom interaction is inevitably moral in nature (Colnerud, 2015), the role that it could play in the moral development of the teacher can also be taken into account.

Although there is a vast literature on different aspects of moral education, the research on ELT classroom moral aspects is still in its infancy. This study attempts to shed light on the subject, focusing on:

- how Iranian female and male English teachers define morality,

- what the most salient themes in their definitions are,

- whether the definition they provide varies across gender and years of experience,

- and if there are any discernible developmental patterns in their conception of morality as they become more experienced.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Morality in Hindsight

The study of morality has always been interwoven with philosophy and philosophers have pondered for a long time over the nature of morality and what it constitutes. Different moral theories have been put forward in order to capture what morality is and despite their variety, they target the same thing. In more technical

terms, a moral theory, as a subsection of normative ethics, tries to describe, explain and justify morality (Audi, 2015). To this effect, multifarious theories have been proposed during the history of moral philosophy to delve into the essence of morality and address questions about what is right and wrong, what is obligatory or impermissible and the like (Jacobs, 2008); among them three stand out: consequentialist theories, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics.

The consequentialist theories emphasize the outcome of the act. Within this framework, as asserted by Driver (2012), the moral quality of an action is solely determined by the effects it brings about, and these effects are usually understood in terms of happiness and well-being. The most outstanding version of consequentialist theories is utilitarianism which was mainly developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. This type of hedonistic consequentialism argues that the ultimate aim of human activity is happiness (Warburton, 2013); therefore, the best way to judge an activity depends on the amount of happiness it generates.

Consequentialism's foil, deontology, derives from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty. In this branch, a concern for rules acts as the cornerstone of moral theory. Deontology is also sometimes described as non-consequentialism (Fieser, 2021), since in deontology what makes a choice right does not depend on the consequences it brings about; in fact, what takes priority is conformity with a moral rule and the obligations it prescribes. Although the range of theories covered by this tradition is quite broad, Kantian ethics stands out as the best known. At the heart of Kant's moral philosophy lies the vindication of rationality. His views hold that moral action should be performed out of a sense of duty, rather than simply out of inclination or feeling or the possibility of some kind of gain for the person performing it (Warburton, 2013). He insisted that while the moral law is equally binding for all rational agents, the bindingness of the moral law is self-imposed; that is, an individual prescribes the moral law to herself (Jankowiak, 2021).

Virtue-centered ethics is primarily concerned with the virtues or moral character rather than enumeration of duties or emphasis on the consequences of an action (Hursthous & Pettigrove, 2018). As put by Athanassoulis (2021), the moral advice that a virtue ethicist is likely to give is "act as a virtuous person would act in your situation" (para.1).

Despite the fact that moral theories have attempted to capture the essence of morality and aspired to justify and explain the concept, no unanimous definition has

been proposed as it changes culturally across time and person. However, thus far, it has come a long way. Philosophers sought to unravel the truth about ethics and happy life (e.g., Kant, 1785/1976; Mill, 1863/2001); sociologists attempted to disclose the mysteries of morality embedded in its societal context (e.g., Durkheim, 1893/1984; Habermas, 1983/1990); and psychologists, tried to look into the black box of human mind to discern how moral reasoning is done (e.g., Haidt, 2012; Kohlberg, 1971). But, the sine qua non of the social study of morality is the identification of the channels through which it permeates every nook and cranny of society. The educational system is undeniably one of them.

2.2. Morality of Teaching

Moral education has always provoked heated debates on whether the indoctrination of good and bad should be a part of education or not. Although the dispute on this issue is still not settled, the pervasiveness of morality in different aspects of teaching is beyond the shadow of a doubt. It is safe to say that "moral education is a matter of developing an understanding of the moral domain" (Barrow, 2007, p.166). However, there is a distinction between the teaching of morality and the morality of teaching. Whereas teaching of morality pertains to the explicit conveying of moral values to another, morality of teaching points out to the inherence of morality in whatever activity teachers do in their classrooms (Fenstermacher et al., 2009; Johnston et al., 1998). As Dewey (1909/1975) properly put it, "every subject, every method of instruction, every incident of school life is pregnant with moral possibility" (p. 58).

Based on this understanding, the moral dimension of teaching extends to whatever incident that takes place in the classroom. In consort with this line of thought, Tom (1980) asserted that even the student-teacher relationship is moral due to its inequality. Noddings (1984, 2002) introduced the ethics of care and prioritized relationships in schools over curriculum. Thus, the moral domain can be conceptualized "as a realm of caring relationships; obligations made explicit in a set of universal principles; or ideals of virtuous conduct, character and a good life" (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005, p.57).

Trying to unravel the inherent moral aspects of teaching, Hansen (1993) employed a narrative format to investigate the teacher's moral impact on students. More specifically, it indicated that the teachers' style, embodied in their gestures,

body movements, facial expressions and tone of voice, carried moral influence on the students. In the same line, Jackson et al. (1993), illustrated how small differences such as gestures and words can be morally significant.

Focusing on classroom discourse, Buzzelli and Johnston (2001), examined the unequal power relations between teacher and student and the interplay of power and morality which gives way to it. They indicated how teacher authority, an educational constant, is shaped through discourse and how it is inherently moral in nature. Taking up on the same line of research, Johnston and Buzzelli (2002), investigated how moral meanings are co-constructed and negotiated in the actions and words of participants as they are involved in a collaborative activity. Language, gesture, proxemics, gaze, and other ways are channels through which the moral meaning is constructed; therefore, they suggested all the interaction taking place in classroom constitutes a moral component that manifests the moral dimension of teaching.

Nevertheless, these undertakings have been follow-ups to the legacy that moral philosophy has offered during its tumultuous history. Scholars such as Sockett (1990, 1993) followed the Aristotelian virtue ethics in representing their views. Some theorists, loyal to Kantian ethics, based their discussions on what duties and principles denote (e.g., Strike, 1999). Some framed their arguments on Kohlberg's theory of moral development (e.g., Higgins, 1991; Oser, 1994) and some invoked the language of feminism and ethics of care (e.g., Noddings, 1984, 2002). The reminiscent of Dewey's philosophy can also be witnessed in the works of scholars such as Hansen (2001, 2002).

2.3. ELT as a Moral Enterprise

The morality of teaching has been studied in different lights: the moral agency of the teacher (e.g., Bergem, 1990; Sanger, 2008), how the student-teacher relationship is affected by moral aspects (e.g., Hansen, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993), the morality of the curriculum (e.g., Campbell, 2012; Shaaban, 2005; Socket, 1992), teachers' development (e.g., Johnston & Buzzelli, 2002; Osguthorpe & Sanger, 2013; Sanger, 2008; Ghorbanimoghaddam et al., 2020), and the moral dilemmas teachers encounters in their practice (e.g., Akbari & Tajik, 2019). However, there is little agreement over what constitutes the foundation for ethical codes of teaching (Campbell, 2008; Martin, 2013; Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016).

Regardless, the pervasive rule still stands that teaching is a moral enterprise. And if so, English language teaching, as a component of the same gestalt, is imbued with moral values as well. Given that moral values are also enabled, extended and maintained through language (Poulshock, 2006), the significance of language as a means of constructing moral meaning in classroom is enlarged. Granted the magnitude, however, not much research has been conducted to address the moral issues in ELT; nevertheless, the bulk of research in this area is piling up after the resurgence of interest in moral dimensions of teaching.

Researching around the role of morality and belief in language teaching, Abdellah and Ibrahim (2013) investigated the relationship between moral commitment and EFL teacher performance. Their results indicated a positive correlation between the participants' religious morality and their performance; thus, the findings suggested that their religious beliefs affected the moral aspects of their teaching to a large extent.

In an innovative study in Iran, Akbari and Tajik (2012) conducted a study which primarily focused on second language teachers' moral knowledge base. Their sample of participants involved 40 English language teachers, half male and half female, which were divided into experienced and less experienced based on their teaching years' experience. Stimulated recall protocol was used to collect the data. The results indicated that there was a difference in the frequency of teachers' pedagogical and moral thoughts, with pedagogical thoughts being more recurrent. Furthermore, the gender and experience also affected the order and the frequency of the categories the teachers recollected.

In a more recent study, Soleimani and Lovat (2019) sought to delve into moral practice of teachers by exploring their perceptions of morality, their moral conflicts in ELT and how they are resolved. They interviewed thirty teachers and used their narratives to elicit their ideas and views on the issue. Through content analysis, they identified three elements as the moral components of English language teaching: a balanced relationship with the learners, being on time, and effective teaching. Regarding the conflicts, the mismatch between teachers' ideologies and the external codes turned out to be the most paramount challenge. Moreover, the cultural and religious beliefs cultivated in teachers were the most influential factors underlying the resolutions to the moral conflicts.

Notwithstanding there is a strong consensus that teaching is a profession with

moral outcomes (e.g., Gholami et al., 2015; Nakar, 2019), teachers seem to be negligent of their roles as moral agents. This might stem from the fact that "educational language tends to call attention only to those problems that can be solved technically" (Huebner, 1996, p. 268) and that the pedagogical basis of teaching has been more stressed than the moral dimension (Akbari & Tajik, 2009, 2012; Allwright, 2003). To bring these "blind spots" (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002, p. 125) of teachers' practice more into light, their cognizance of teaching as a moral endeavor should be strengthened (Osguthorpe & Sanger, 2013; Sanger, 2008).

Albeit the field has hosted several studies dealing with the morality of teaching, the ambiguity of the term has permeated the educational research as well. As such, there is no unanimous definition for the term. There are not any consensual ethical codes for teachers' behavior (Campbell, 2008; Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016), nor is it clear what morality means in teachers' practice.

Despite all the controversies surrounding the concept of morality, it is undeniable that every individual has a sense of morality. Krebs (2011) believed from a psychological perspective morality goes on inside people's heads and the best way to understand it is to induce them to explicate it. Thus, to demystify what morality means in the teachers' knowledge base, one should resort to teacher's cognition. A poke into teachers' "mental lives" (Borg, 2003, p.81) might reveal the unobservable cognitive dimensions of teachers which underpin their decision-making in their daily practice (Akbari & Tajik, 2012; Amini et al., 2020; Soleimani & Lovat, 2019).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

In total, 720 Iranian English teachers, half male, and half female, participated in this study. They were MA holders in one of the English-related fields in Iran (English language teaching, translation studies, and English literature). The participants were between 24 to 50 years of age, and equally categorized into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd decade of their teaching experience (i.e., 120 males 1st decade, 120 females 1st decade, 120 males 2nd decade, 120 females 2nd decade, 120 male 3rd decade, 120 female 3rd decade). As for the decades, the middle years of teaching experience were chosen; in other words, the participants of the 1st decade were in the 4th,5th, and 6th, the 2nd decade in 14th, 15th, and 16th, and the 3rd decade in 24th, 25th, and 26th years of teaching. The participants of the preliminary phase of this study were 120

English high school teachers in Iran who were chosen using purposive sampling which is a non-probability sampling technique (Ary et al., 2014). The other 600 Iranian English teachers were conveniently selected from high school language teachers across the country.

3.2. Data Collection

This study, framed in a mixed-methods design, consisted of an initial qualitative data collection and analysis, which could be typified as interpretive study (Ary et al., 2014), followed by a quantitative phase to investigate the participants' definitions of morality across gender and years of teaching experience. In the qualitative phase, 120 Iranian English teachers (20 participants in each group based on gender and level of experience) were asked to provide their own definition of morality. Half the data were rendered in written form while the rest were collected through a short interview with the rest of the participants, focusing on how they defined morality. The interviews took between 5 to 10 minutes in which the participants were asked "what is your own definition of morality?" followed by "would you care to elaborate on that?" if needed. All the interviews were in Persian.

The findings of the qualitative part, were used to develop the 6-option item to collect data for the quantitative phase as is the characteristic of sequential exploratory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In other words, based on the definitions provided by 120 participants in the qualitative phase, six definitions were extracted as male 1st decade, female 1st decade, male 2nd decade, female 2nd decade, male 3rd decade, and female 3rd decade. Subsequently, 600 participants (equally divided in categories of 100 across gender and teaching experience) were provided by a single 6-option item and were asked to select the definition that best represents their own stance on the definition of morality. Needless to say, the participants did not know to which decade or gender the definitions corresponded.

3.3. Data Analysis

After the data from the qualitative phase were collected, a thematic analysis of the gathered data was carried out through coding in order to discern any likely recurring theme in the definitions, and venture the possibility of detecting a common definition for each group. To ensure the credibility of the single-item questionnaire, the themes

and the emerging definitions for each group were checked by three experts who reviewed the definitions. Furthermore, to ascertain the dependability, both intrarater and interrater agreement was used (Ary et al., 2014). The output of this phase was six definitions corresponding with each gender across teaching experience.

For the first part of the quantitative phase, morality definitions were divided into two categories: female definitions and male definitions. In other words, three of the provided definitions fell under male and the other three under female. As the purpose was to figure out whether there was an association between gender and the way teachers defined morality, a Chi-square Test was conducted. Furthermore, to discover any possible significant differences between teachers of different genders across their years of experience, crosstabulation was carried out. Also, the possibility of any emerging pattern based on the experience was investigated.

4. Results

4.1. Qualitative Phase

4.1.1. Male Teachers

There was a strong consensus among male participants of the 1st category that morality is a set of principles which leads the individual in choosing right over wrong as put by 24-year-old David (all used names are pseudonyms): "it is a set of principles that enables you to decide what is right". Nevertheless, they held different views regarding the source these principles stem from. Some believed they were innate; while others assumed social norms instill them in people through designating right and wrong behavior. One of the participants who belonged to the latter group was the 28-year-old Marco who said "I think morality is a set of fixed, inner traits within each human being. However, the norms in the society determine the right or wrong behavior".

Either defined as 'courage' or 'a set of beliefs and ideas about what is right or wrong, the male participants' definitions of morality in the second group carried with it a personalized flair. Although the main theme prevalent in the definitions was distinguishing between right and wrong behavior, what makes it distinct form an institutionalized behavior was the agentic role that the participants had ascribed to themselves. The definition provided by the 34 –year- old Henry depicts the previous point: "A set of principles that a person delineates between himself/herself and his/her conscience; and if s/he disobeys them, s/he will face conflicts".

The definitions in the last category carried even more personalized weight. Although they are mostly concerned with the distinction between right and wrong, the defining borderlines seem to be designated by the individual/agent himself. Morality is either seen as a barrier or conceived within a relativistic framework or defined as virtues clearly conceptualized as personal moral principles. An exemplary definition presented by 45-year-old Larry goes as "Fairness, empathy, conscience, self-restraint, kindness, patience, and respecting others. Transparency in behavior is also important to me". Seemingly, the last category included multicolored, more personalized definitions of morality. Three definitions, encompassing the main themes as echoed in male renderings of morality, were extracted to be used in the next phase of the study.

Table 1
Morality Definitions Extracted from Male Participants

Decade	Definition
1st	Morality refers to a set of innate or structural rules to differentiate right from wrong.
2nd	Morality stands for the capability and inclination to choose right over wrong.
3rd	Morality is concerned with a set of self-imposed criteria to differentiate right from wrong.

4.1.2. Female Teachers

The 1st decade female teachers' conception of morality seemed to be less personalized and more in consort with an institutionalized, inculcated understanding of the term, which mostly bears the distinction between doing right and wrong. The following definition provided by the 25-year-old Kate illustrates this orientation: "morality is related to the principles of right conduct and/or the distinction between doing right and wrong; in other words, all that is concerned to be ethics in any field". A common point which spread through all the definitions was that morality is mostly seen as a framework of principles which is pre-designated and the people's behavior should be placed within this framework. Inspected more closely, a modern approach with a tendency toward deontological Kantian ethics can be identified in how the participants of this group conceptualized morality.

Female teachers in their 2nd decade of teaching inspected morality as reflected in work ethics or what Oser (1991) called "professional responsibility" (p. 196). They construed morality in terms of their professional responsibilities to be committed and

passionate teachers, to go the extra mile to help and support the students, and make the world a better place to live through education. The definition presented by the 39-year-old Sarah shows this focus on the sense of responsibility: "morality means how committed you are and stick to the promises you make to your students (as well as the people you work with/for). It all comes to work with passion".

All in all, the female participants in their 2nd decade of teaching experience defined morality mostly about the consequences that the moral act brings about; whether the consequences were perceived in terms of education or the general outcome the act generates. Taking responsibility was also another theme that ran through the female participants' definitions in the second category. Hence, the common theme that spread through the definitions in this group was modern approach to ethics that slanted toward utilitarianism, emphasizing the consequences of the acts based on the amount of benefits and happiness they bring about. The theme manifests itself truly in this definition presented by 36-year-old high school teacher Maria,

To me, morality is synonymous with goodness and humanity. Anything that benefits humans in reaching what they need to live in peace and prosperity and does not harm others in any way is moral. And by others, I mean humans, but also the universe and whatever it holds.

Society was the new element that played a role in how the female participants of the third group defined morality. Morality was not perceived merely in connection to the individual alone but it was embraced in the social context in which it is embedded as in this definition provided by 44-year-old Audrey: "morality refers to how we define our role in the society which lets us act with reference to some universally known norms". The vindictive power of reason also manifested itself as the authority which governed social behavior, as in the definition "The wise behavior which stands on each individual's essence and nature in society; in a manner that s/he does not harm himself/herself or others in any psychological, sensual, and social way" provided by 47-year-old Bonny. Nonetheless, the vindication of reason was confined within the boundaries of consequentialist ethics. The extracted definitions for female participants were as follows:

Table 2

Morality Definitions Extracted from Female Participants

Decade	Definition
1st	Morality is a set of predesigned rules which leads to doing the right thing.
2nd	Morality can be defined as a set of rules which helps one to differentiate between right and wrong, and taking responsibility for one's actions.
3rd	Morality is the inclination to follow and do the right and reasonable thing in different social situations.

4.2. Quantitative Phase

For this phase, the definitions presented in Tables 1 and 2 were put together in a 6-option item. The item was presented to the participants and they were asked to choose the option they believed was the most correct definition for morality. All 600 participants selected one definition of morality as their preference, three of which were assigned as female definitions and the other three as male definitions for the purpose of this part. The result of crosstabulation and Chi-square Test is provided in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Gender Morality Definition Crosstabulation

			Morality Definition		Total
			male	**female**	
Gender	Male	Count	215	85	300
		% within MoralDefGender	72.1%	28.1%	50.0%
	Female	Count	83	217	300
		% within MoralDefGender	27.9%	71.9%	50.0%
	Total	Count	298	302	600
		% within MoralDefGender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4

Chi-square Test for Gender and Morality Definition

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	116.165	1	.000
Continuity Correction	114.412	1	.000
Effect Size	.440		.000
N of Valid Cases	600		

Since the test was considered 2 by 2, continuity correction and phi coefficient are used to interpret the data analysis. As presented in Tables 3 and 4, both male and

female teachers, in most cases, chose the definitions extracted from their own genders. This difference between them is statistically significant (114.412, p <0.001, df=1). The amount of effect size (φ = .440) also shows an almost strong association between the two variables using Cohen's (1988) criteria of .10 for small effect, .30 for medium effect and .50 for large effect. In other words, the definition of morality varies across gender based on the findings of this study.

Although the difference was significant in the previous section, the amount of effect size was less than strong (<0.5). Therefore, and to further explore the data, Chi-square Test was also conducted separately for each decade to check out how the teaching experience weighs in this part. The results of these three tests are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Chi-square Test for Gender and Morality Definition across Teaching Decade

	1st			2nd			3rd		
	Value	**df**	**Sig.**	**Value**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Value**	**df**	**Sig.**
Chi-Square	6.246	5	.283	71.727	5	.000	93.753	5	.000
Effect Size	.177		.283	.599		.000	.685		.000
N	200			200			200		

As shown in the table, there is no significant difference between male and female teachers in their 1st decade of teaching in terms of morality definition (χ^2 = 6.246, p <0.001 .283, φ = .177, *df* = 5). However, there exists a significant difference between male and female teachers in their 2nd (χ^2 = 71.727, p<0.001, φ = .599, *df* = 5) and 3rd decades (χ^2 = 93.753, p <0.001, φ = .685, *df* = 5) of teaching. The amounts of effect size also show strong associations between variables in the 2nd and 3rd decades. The results of these two tests together imply that both male and female teachers are likely to start off from a fundamentally similar conceptualization but part ways as they become more experienced. It also explains why the effect size of the previous test was less than strong since it included the male and female participants of the 1st decade, who are not different when it comes to defining morality.

After exploring how gender plays a role in conceptualizing morality, the next step was to investigate how the teaching experience presents itself in the definitions

separately for males and females. Therefore, males and females were analyzed separately in the next two tests.

Table 6
Males' Teaching Experience and Morality Definition Crosstabulation

		Morality Definition						N
		M 1st	F 1st	M2nd	F 2nd	M 3rd	F 3rd	
1st	Count	36	32	14	8	5	5	100
	% within definition	72.0	66.7	17.3	40.0	6.0	27.8	33.3
2nd	Count	8	8	38	8	31	7	100
	% within definition	16.0	16.7	46.9	40.0	37.3	38.9	33.3
3rd	Count	6	8	29	4	47	6	100
	% within definition	12.0	16.7	35.8	20.0	56.6	33.3	33.3
N	Count	50	48	81	20	83	18	300
	% within definition	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(M = Male, F = Female)

Table 7
Chi-square Test for Teaching Experience and Morality Definition for Males

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	103.064	10	.000
Effect Size	.586		.000
N of Valid Cases	300		

As indicated in Tables 6 and 7, the male teachers mainly selected the definition of morality that was extracted from their own gender and decade of experience, as the result of the test is statistically significant (χ^2 = 103.064, p <0.001, φ = .586, df=10) and shows strong association between the variables. Also, regarding the 2nd and 3rd decades for male teachers, a probable pattern is discernible. The 2nd decade teachers mostly selected the definition from their own group (38), and the next most frequently selected option was the male 3rd decade definition (31 times). These two options cover almost seventy percent of the whole data in the group. Moreover, the

3rd decade male teachers, in most instances, selected the definition of their own group (47 times); and the next most selected option was the male 2nd decade (29 times). Overall, these two options cover more than 75 percent of the whole answers.

Table 8
Females' Teaching Experience and Morality Definition Crosstabulation

		Morality Definition						N
		M 1st	F 1st	M 2nd	F 2nd	M 3rd	F 3rd	
1st	Count	33	39	6	9	3	10	100
	% within definition	71.7	73.6	33.3	12.9	15.8	10.6	33.3
2nd	Count	8	6	7	41	8	30	100
	% within definition	17.4	11.3	38.9	58.6	42.1	31.9	33.3
3rd	Count	5	8	5	20	8	54	100
	% within definition	10.9	15.1	27.8	28.6	42.1	57.4	33.3
N	Count	46	53	18	70	19	94	300
	% within definition	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 9
Chi-square Test for Teaching Experience and Morality Definition for Females

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	126.182	10	.000
Effect Size	.649		.000
N of Valid Cases	300		

As presented in Tables 8 and 9, female teachers also chose morality definitions which fit their own gender and decade of experience most of the time. The results revealed that the difference was significant (χ^2 = 126.182, p <0.001, φ = .649, df=10) with a strong association. Also, similar to male teachers, a probable pattern is detectable in female teachers. The 2nd decade teachers selected the definition from their own group most frequently (41), and the next most selected option was female 3rd decade definition (30 times). These two options cover more than seventy percent of the whole data in the group. Moreover, the 3rd decade female teachers selected the definition of their own group in most cases (54 times). The female 2nd decade option was the next most frequently selected item (20 times). These two options cover almost 75 percent of the whole answers.

5. Discussion

The previous studies which tried to investigate the morality of teaching focused on how it can be manifested in the classroom. The moral aspect can be mirrored in the teacher's style (Hansen, 2001; Jacksn et al., 1993) or the power in teacher-student relation. Soleimani and Lovat (2019) tried to uncover the moral component of teaching in their study of ELT teachers. Verifying the results of the previous studies, their participants viewed morality in terms of a balanced relationship with the learners, being on time, and effective teaching. The present study, however, leaning more toward a philosophical approach to morality, made an attempt to inspect the teachers' definitions of morality, and whether there are any significant differences concerning gender and years of teaching experience.

The common theme for all male instructors was the concern over right and wrong. The bottom line of all their definitions was choosing the right act over the wrong one. However, the way to achieve it was not the same for them based on their level of experience. An interesting point in the definitions was that it got more personalized as the experience of the teachers increased; while less experienced teachers (those in their 1st decade) almost never brought up the agency in their definitions, more experienced teachers emphasized it. It is safe to say that for most teachers in their 3rd decade of teaching morality was something agentic and personal. Teachers in their 2nd decade also referred to agency, and morality was more personalized for them, more than less experienced teachers. The difference between 2nd decade teachers with those in their 3rd decade was that the agency was not as strong, and they brought up rules in their definitions from time to time. Third decade male teachers almost never referred to prescribed rules and put more emphasis on their agency.

The prevalent theme among female teachers, like males, was the concern over right and wrong. However, females emphasized on doing the right thing compared to males who seldom mentioned the act of 'doing'. For the less experienced female teachers, the unanimous point was that morality consists of a set of predesigned principles for doing the right thing. Unlike their male counterparts, they never mentioned the source of the rules as innate. The interesting point about female participants was that, unlike males, they never completely got rid of principles in their definitions with the increase in their level of experience. However, they modified the function of principles by the level of experience.

The 2nd decade female teachers, taking into consideration the rules, added the responsibility of the teacher in their conceptualization and emphasized on the consequences of actions. Besides the rules, responsibility, and consequences, the 3rd decade female teachers brought in the contextual element of society in their definitions. They believed that the rules must take into account the nature of society and the power of reason must be brought into the picture regarding the consequences of actions.

As was mentioned in the introduction, Plato was once concerned with how virtue is required. The findings of this study, not attempting to provide an answer to Plato's inquiry, suggests that the definition of morality is likely to be modified by the experience, at least for Iranian English teachers. It is not possible to certainly assign the level of experience as the only reason behind the modification in defining the concept. There are a great number of factors at work influencing people's conceptualization of such important matters such as morality. Taking these into account, it seems the level of experience is actually one of the influential factors.

The difference between teachers of different gender and the modification they go through is also thought-provoking. Again, although the differences cannot be all because of gender as the only factor, it provides room for speculation. It seems that Iranian English teachers of both genders start off with a fairly similar conceptualization of morality which is more in concert with Kant's deontological approach to morality (Jankowiak, 2021). Certainly, there exist various reasons for such a similar starting point, such as the same materials they study in the Teacher Training Centers, or even the novelty of the experience itself which may push toward fixed principles to reduce the anxiety that comes along with starting a new experience. However, males and females are more likely to go through different paths of development or modification regarding morality. It is not actually surprising since it has long been believed that gender is a social construct, and men and women live in entirely different worlds (e.g., Gilovich et al., 2016).

Female teachers, as the findings revealed, start with a prescriptive conceptualization with a deontological component and move toward a more consequentialist (that of John Stuart Mill) and contextual definition. Male teacher, on the other hand, starting off from a similar point, move toward a more agentic and relativist outlook which is manifested in post-structural and post-modern approaches (Buckingham, 2011). Overall, male and female teachers' journey commences within modern approach to ethics and it moves forward through a more

contextual relativistic path. Nevertheless, the speculations must be considered with caution since participants were of different ages, which is an important factor in itself. They have been brought up in different circumstances as the world is rapidly changing. These changes are also evident in the educational arena in which they practice as teachers.

Asking about the participants' definitions of morality might not be the best way to probe their mentality about an entity as broad as morality since different factors might affect their conceptions in different contexts. Moreover, Stronger claims were possible if the same participants provided their three definitions of morality in ten-year intervals. But, even so, there is no practical way to control for the general changes in the world which affect everything. Also, the study only included Iranian English teachers, and if the nationality of the participants and/or the subject of teaching were different, the results may change. What can be said is that experience alongside other factors actually affects teachers' conceptualization of morality, simply because it makes teachers face various school life incidents any of which, as Dewey (1909/1975), rightly said "is pregnant with moral possibility" (p. 58).

6. Conclusion

Although it is widely accepted that teaching is a moral endeavor, the fact that there is little agreement on what constitutes the ethics of teacher professionalism merits attention (Martin, 2013). Institutions involved in teacher education are likely to have a primary definition for morality which might vary across cultures and societies. Nonetheless, there is a gap between the scholarly literature on morality of teaching and teacher education as most training programs do not prepare the would-be teachers for the moral essence of their work (Sanger, 2008). The results of the present study could shed light on how teachers perceive morality and how their perceptions go through changes based on their gender and years of experience, which might in turn be influential in making teachers cognizant of the moral nature of their profession.

Furthermore, regarding teacher education and findings of this study, some interesting questions arise: whether the conceptualization novice teachers have is the result and actual purpose of their education, how come those definitions go through changes in one direction instead of another, whether it is normal or problematic that male and female teachers go through different changes in regard to

conceptualizing morality, whether or not teacher education disrupt or change these patterns, etc.

These enquiries might open up new windows to further research on improving teacher education programs; issues that have been left out so far but are beginning to loom in the horizon. As also indicated in Akbari and Tajik's study (2012), teachers are more concerned with the pedagogical aspects of their teaching, hence, neglecting the moral aspect which can play a role as significant as the pedagogy itself. Teacher education programs should pay closer attention to moral issues and present prospective teachers with different theories and stances on the concept along with the difficulties and shortcomings each of them might face in real life situations. There is a good chance that the definitions teachers have in their mind influence their moral decision making and a mistake on the part of teachers might heavily impact students' education if not their whole life.

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About the Authors

Azar Hosseini Fatemi is an associate professor in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. She has published abundantly in various national and international journals. Her main research interests include applied linguistics, critical pedagogy and innovations in second language teaching and learning.

Neda Moezzipour is a Ph.D. Candidate of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. She has more than a decade of experience in teaching English in different universities and institutions. Her main areas of interest are social and psychological aspects of language teaching and morality of education.

Behzad Ghonsooly is a full professor of Applied Linguistics at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. He has published numerous books in the EFL field and more than 100 papers in various national and international journals. His main research interests are applied linguistics, technology in language learning and assessment, and introspection psychology.