

Fostering EFL Learners' Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement in Iranian EFL Classrooms: The Contribution of Morality as a Cooperation Factor

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KEYWORDS

Morality As Cooperation (MAC), Language Classroom Engagement (LCE), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners

ABSTRACT

Morality plays a vital role in how learners engage with learning, shaping not just behavioral actions but also their deeper cognitive and emotional connections. This study investigates whether morality as cooperation (MAC) factors can foster behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement among Iranian EFL learners. Grounded in seven MAC dimensions, family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property, the study situates engagement within Iran's secondary school context, where strong socio-cultural norms and examination pressures prevail. The quantitative study surveyed 500 EFL students in the 7th to 12th grades with an equal proportion of male and female students. Primary data were collected using the Language Classroom Engagement Scale (LCES) and the Morality as Cooperation Questionnaire (MAC-Q). Structural equation modeling (SEM) via SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 probed the MAC factor-relationship to dimensions of engagement, with model fit indices and bootstrapping guiding estimation. All MAC factors are positively related to the three dimensions of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive). Of these, group, reciprocity, and heroism are the strongest predictors of Overall Language Class Engagement (LCE). Deference is negatively correlated with emotional engagement, implying intricate effects of some moral dispositions on affective commitment. Overall, the results indicate that MAC supports learner motivation, emotional commitment, and cognitive effort in language learning. The paper urges adding moral growth to EFL teaching to boost participation and achievement, highlighting how moral values, group support, and heroism can enhance motivation and focus while addressing challenges like deference in Iranian classrooms.

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Introduction

Current developments in English as a second language acquisition research have led to the ascription of greater importance to learners' active participation and engagement in psychological and social variables. Promoting students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is widely accepted as one of the most important predictors of successful language learning attainment. Engagement, as a complex construct encompassing students' visible participation (behavioral), affective dedication (emotional), and

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mental exertion (cognitive), has far-reaching influences on motivation, perseverance, and attainment (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Derakhshan & Datu, 2025). In EFL, when learners are obsessed with complex linguistic and cultural concerns, fostering engagement is the means to address the complexity of language acquisition (Erdemutu et al., 2024; Hiver et al., 2024). Despite its central role, promoting fruitful student engagement is a perennial issue, and particularly so in multicultural classrooms such as those in Iran, where motivation and classroom climate are also influenced by unique social and educational conditions (Ghanizadeh et al., 2020; Han, 2024). More recent scholarship on education has given increased attention to the roles of individuals and society in engagement.

While teacher variables such as support, caring behavior, and enthusiasm have been linked to student positive affect and increased engagement (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Sun, 2023; Zhang, Hu, & Yu, 2024), burgeoning evidence also indicates the cardinal significance of intrinsic psychological resources such as morality-related constructs mentioned in the theory of MAC (Curry et al., 2019b). Research has shown that moral behavior as cooperative action—i.e., socially beneficial behavior based on justice, love, and the mutual respect of others—positively affects the prosociality and moral climate of the class, and this, in turn, can be the students' motivation and engagement (Derakhshan et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Such atmospheres not only foster the formation of good relationships between peers and the teacher-student interaction but also provide the necessary emotional and intellectual support that is indispensable for the continuous learning of a foreign language (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). Rooted in Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2018), the present study is interested in morality as a cooperation facet in Iranian EFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

Positive psychological qualities like grit and well-being have been empirically established as effective predictors of engagement and allow resilience and persistence of effort in language learning classrooms (Derakhshan & Datu, 2025; Jia, 2022). Yet, the juncture between morality and participation is less investigated, especially in non-Western and test-preparation-based learning settings where social norms and moral values hold absolute power over classroom practice (Han, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). As language learning is a social process involving cooperation and morality, an investigation of the morality aspect would be able to provide new avenues to mechanisms of learner participation. This research concentrates on this gap through exploring the interplay of MAC factors and the three facets of engagement in EFL classrooms.

Addressing the stated gap in education based on the previous research (Pari, 2024; Shadlou & Kashef, 2025), and using a quantitative approach, this research examined whether student moral orientation predicted levels of engagement and how these factors interacted with psychological resources. The question addressed the demand for additional integrative postulates to encompass cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of language learning activity (Guo, Xu, & Chen, 2023; Mercer, 2023). It also takes into account the context specificity of Iranian EFL classrooms with prominent cultural and motivational profiles affecting learning activity (Bayat et al., 2025). Cumulatively, this study contributes to the emerging literature on learner engagement by making centrality a matter of MAC, a required ingredient in establishing active and full presence in language classrooms.

It contributes theoretically by integrating moral psychology into language education engagement frameworks and has implications for practice for teachers who aim to establish ethical and engaging learning environments. Finally, and not least importantly, such an understanding

would hopefully lead to the pedagogical development of more effective pedagogical approaches to foster the overall development of Iranian and comparable EFL settings' learners.

Literature Review

Theoretical Bases

LCE is usually at the core of effective second language acquisition, comprising three interrelated dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to observable participation, persistence in activities, class attendance, and following the rules. Emotional engagement involves the affective experiences of students, such as interest, enthusiasm, and connectedness with teachers, peers, and learning content. Cognitive engagement denotes mental effort invested in deep learning, higher-order thinking, and self-regulation. Socio-cultural and linguistic demands related to EFL contexts have raised a pressing need for LCE that requires not only more cognitive effort on the part of the learners but also emotional investment and adjustment.

Morality as Cooperation (MAC) highlights pro-sociality, ethicality, and respect as bases for healthy learner-teacher relationships and continued engagement (Derakhshan et al., 2024; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). Recently, morality has been increasingly viewed as a foundation of social behavior and conscience that synthesizes biological and cultural solutions to cooperation problems in human societies (Curry et al., 2019b). This perspective befits Durkheim's emphasis on moral education toward discipline and social integration (Durkheim, 2012), and it underlines the importance of family, reciprocity, and justice values in creating moral climates that favor engagement (Akarsu & Turhan, 2022; Curry et al., 2019b).

Empirical Studies

Empirical research shows that the three dimensions of engagement are dynamic and interactive, supporting long-term motivation and overcoming learning obstacles. Resilience, task-based instruction, and morality-based collaboration relate positively to motivation, well-being, and engagement in Iranian contexts. The studies also confirm the positive impact of MAC on the classroom moral climate, peer relationships, and student motivation. Whereas antecedents like grit and happiness are established for engagement, the role of morality-based cooperation remains less researched, especially within non-Western societies. The contribution of MAC to Iranian EFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement will be investigated in this study by integrating the above theoretical and empirical insights. (Akbari et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2022; Ding & Zhu, 2025).

Methodologically, an integrative methodology was used to integrate cognitive, affective, and social elements (Acosta-Manzano & Mercer, 2025; Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024) and address Iranian motivational context-specificities (Bayat et al., 2025). The proposed model illustrated in Figure 1 indicates seven MAC dimensions, family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property, that motivate LCE, with potential interrelations among moral orientations

and active, affective, and cognitive involvement. From the aforementioned discussion, the research questions for the present study were as follows:

- 1) Is there any statistically substantial relationship between EFL learners' morality as cooperation factors and behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement?
- 2) To what extent do morality as cooperation factors contribute to EFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement?

Method

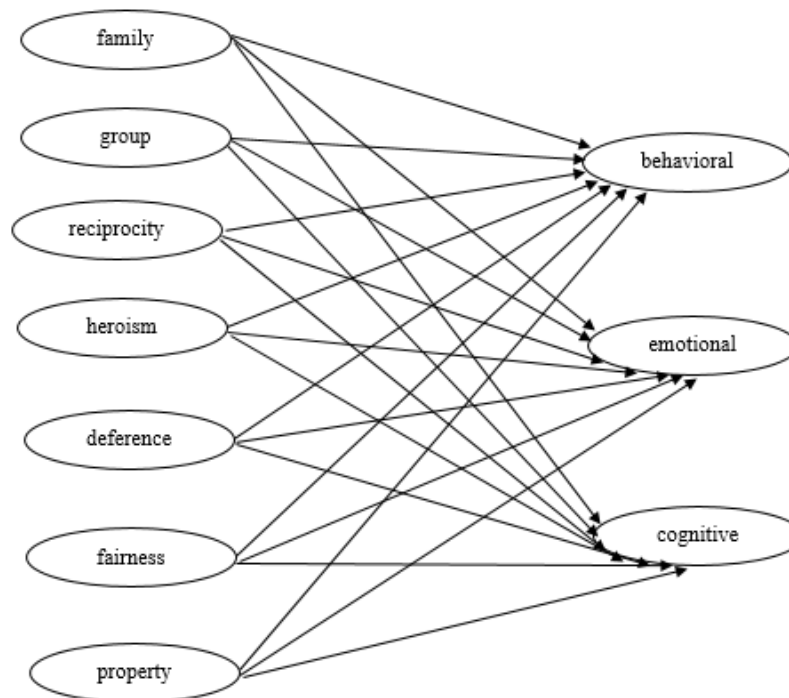
Research Design

This study was quantitative research and the data was collected in a single pint in time from a specific group of Iranian EFL learners. This design is ideal for examining the relationships among variables such as MAC and LCE without any manipulation in the study phase. It enables efficient data collection and analysis to identify associations and test statistical methods such as SEM as an appropriate approach for addressing the objectives of the study (Kline, 2023; Meyers et al., 2016; Pallant, 2020).

Theoretical Model of the Study

Figure 1

The hypothesized model



Participants

The target population included Iranian EFL learners in grades 7 to 12, aged approximately 13 to 18, who attended a variety of high schools that had joined the national educational system in which English is taught as a foreign language starting from the seventh grade. Through convenience sampling, 500 participants were selected to ensure equal numbers from each grade and gender, including slightly more females (52.86%) than males (47.14%). The sample size was justified in line with established guidelines in quantitative research, particularly bearing in mind the number of items in the instruments and the need for adequate statistical power to conduct Structural Equation Modeling (Cohen et al., 2000; Costello & Osborne, 2005; Meyers et al., 2016). This sample size provides enough reliability and validity in analyzing complex relationships between morality and engagement constructs among this population (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic information

Variable	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	264	52.86
	Male	236	47.14
Grade	7	72	14.4
	8	72	14.4
	9	171	34.25
	10	71	14.2
	11	71	14.2
	12	43	8.57
Age	Minimum	13	
	Maximum	18	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	14.96 (1.32)	

Instruments

This research journey employed two main instruments to measure key constructs: student engagement in language classrooms and morality as cooperation factors. The following sections describe the Language Classroom Engagement Scale (LCES) and the Morality as Cooperation Questionnaire (MAC-Q) in detail (Table 2).

Language Classroom Engagement Scale (LCES)

The Language Classroom Engagement Scale (LCES) is a recently created instrument by Eerdemutu et al. (2024) that measures student engagement in language learning environments. It comprises nine items that are categorized into behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, with each category having four items. The LCES enables responders to present their engagement levels efficiently by employing a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This tool has been found to have excellent reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha

values for both the overall scale and its subscales being greater than the limit required of 0.70. Structural validity has been supported by various validation procedures, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, which show that the LCES is an accurate reflection of the complexities of engagement in language classrooms. The scale also exhibits strong associations with the satisfaction of needs and academic achievement, thereby providing a basis for its external validity (Eerdemutu et al., 2024). The present study indicated that Cronbach alpha values were .89 for the total score, .87 for the behavioral engagement, .85 for the emotional engagement, and .83 for the cognitive engagement, which suggested that the internal consistency was substantially high. The confirmatory factor analysis revealed the suitability of the model, as all the goodness-of-fit indices were within the acceptable range (e.g., CFI = .95, RMSEA = .04), thus giving an indication of the LCES representation in our sample. Also, the scale's convergence was signified by correlations, which were all positive and significant with comparable motivational constructs, thereby being in line with the scale's psychometric strength (Kline, 2023).

Morality as Cooperation Questionnaire (MAC-Q)

This research implemented a moral-based scale developed by Curry et al. (2019a) to probe the moral thinking of EFL learners from seven different domains as defined by the MAC theory: family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property. The questionnaire comprises two separate scales, one for relevance and one for judgment, which aim at somewhat different dimensions of morality: the former was about the extent to which the given issue was relevant to participants' moral views, and the latter about participants' moral judgment.

The MAC-Q is a single-report tool intended for assessing the moral attitudes of an individual. It consists of 42 items, which are equally divided into two parts: the first deals with the relevance of the item, while the second one is concerned with judgment. The relevance part is assessed by the participants on a 6-point Likert scale. At the lower end of the scale, 0 stands for "not at all relevant," while at the higher end, 5 means "extremely relevant." The judgment part operates with a 5-point Likert scale, where 0 corresponds to "strongly disagree," and 4 denotes "strongly agree." The reliability of the MAC-Q is evident from the two coefficient alpha values of 0.89 for the relevance component and 0.87 for the judgment component. The MAC-Q is very effective in bringing out the seven-factor model of morality per the MAC theory, as it is consistent with the empirical data, constituting a credible and helpful framework for the study of moral values related to cooperation. These psychometric properties make the MAC-Q a dependable and trustworthy instrument for the identification of individuals' scores across the basic moral principles as described by Curry et al. (2019a).

Within the present research, Cronbach alpha values were .91 and .88 for the relevance and judgment scales, respectively, suggesting high internal reliability. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis were in line with the seven-factor model and the indices of fit were acceptable (CFI = .94, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .05). Furthermore, the MAC-Q scores were significantly associated with the measures of prosocial behavior and ethical decision-making that were theoretically related, thus confirming the convergent validity of the instrument and its stability in the assessment of moral cognition among EFL learners (Kline, 2023).

Table 2

Instruments

Instrument Name	Dimensions	Indicators / Items	Foundational Theories
Language Classroom Engagement Scale (LCES)	Behavioral, Cognitive, Emotional	3 items per dimension measuring effort, affect, and cognition rated on a 5-point Likert scale	Engagement Theory (Eerdemutu et al., 2024)
Morality as Cooperation Questionnaire (MAC-Q)	Relevance, Judgment across 7 domains: Family, Group, Reciprocity, Heroism, Deference, Fairness, Property	42 items total - Relevance Scale (21 items): 6-point Likert (0 = not relevant to 5 = extremely relevant) - Judgment Scale (21 items): 5-point Likert (0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree)	Morality as Cooperation Theory (Curry et al., 2019)

Data Collection

The process of data collection for this research was implemented in a stepwise manner to verify and ensure the data's pertinence and truthfulness in regard to the engagement and morality aspects as cooperation factors among Iranian EFL learners. Firstly, an ethical approval was achieved from the institutional review board at Hakim Sabzevari University. Subsequently, upon receiving the go-ahead from the authorities of the schools, 500 schoolchildren, aged between 13 and 18, and studying in grades 7 to 12 were chosen by convenience sampling from different high schools in Iran.

The data were gathered in the process of the regular school day in the classrooms where students were in their natural learning environment. Informing the participants about the study's purpose and confidentiality along with their right to take part voluntarily was part of the preparation. Paper-based or electronic versions of the Language Classroom Engagement Scale (LCES) and the Morality as Cooperation Questionnaire (MAC-Q) were provided in Persian to ensure the understanding of the content. The questionnaires were completed individually under the supervision of the research team to assist with any clarifications.

The materials were distributed so that each group could finish in 30 to 40 minutes. Then, the data collected were inspected to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data, and only the responses that were complete and consistent were used in the analysis. This operation not only guarantees a trustworthy dataset representing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement along with the seven MAC factors for further statistical analysis as specified in the methodology of the study but also complies with the ethical requirements of the study.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was conducted through SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. The Mahalanobis distance method was used for the identification and exclusion of multivariate outliers in the dataset. To better understand and measure the relationships among the variables under investigation, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were conducted.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied for the purpose of confirming the theoretical model, which aimed to explore the impact of MAC factors on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. To control the Type one error inflation due to the multiple statistical tests, the Bonferroni correction was used, which adjusted the significance level to $p < 0.001$. The extent of indirect mediation, if found, was determined through bootstrapping with 5000 resamples executed for the generation of bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals; inclusion of zero in the intervals was the criterion for non-significant mediation.

The evaluation of model fit was according to various indices. The criteria that the fit has been acceptable are as follows: the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df \leq 8$); goodness-of-fit index (GFI) ≥ 0.90 ; adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) ≥ 0.90 ; comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ 0.90 ; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ≤ 0.08 ; and root mean square residual (RMR) ≤ 0.10 (Meyers et al., 2016; Pallant, 2020).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis (RQ1)

Table 3 shows the central tendency and the spread of the study variables. The findings suggest that EFL workers exhibit the morality factors of the cooperation concept at a level from medium to high. Thus, the average scores vary from 20.62 (deference) to 25.42 (reciprocity) on respective scales. In the same vein, the engagement of learners is generally at a good level across behavioral ($M = 12.46$), emotional ($M = 12.03$), and cognitive ($M = 11.93$) spheres, which can be interpreted as learners' active involvement in language acquisition. Most of the skewness and kurtosis indices vary within the tight limits set for normal data.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for variables

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Sd	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age	13	18	14.96	1.32	0.67	0.02
Morality as Cooperation (MAC)	64	219	162.61	23.75	-0.34	0.75
Language Classroom Engagement (LCE)	9	45	36.41	6.01	-0.89	1.42
Family	6	33	23.54	4.91	-0.32	-0.02
Group	8	33	24.29	4.72	-0.45	0.09
Reciprocity	11	33	25.42	4.42	-0.47	-0.02
Heroism	8	33	24.17	4.82	-0.36	0.17
Deference	7	33	20.62	4.90	-0.12	-0.06

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Sd	Skewness	Kurtosis
Fairness	9	33	23.34	4.86	-0.16	-0.21
Property	10	33	21.23	4.63	0.14	-0.38
Behavioral Engagement	3	15	12.46	2.24	-0.92	1.03
Emotional Engagement	3	15	12.03	2.74	-0.98	0.88
Cognitive Engagement	3	15	11.93	2.10	-0.45	0.53

Table 4 displays the correlation coefficients of Pearson. These indicate the relationships between the MAC factors and three types of LCE: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. Each of the morality dimensions, family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property, indicates significant positive correlations with behavioral engagement. The values of coefficients range from $r = .195$ to $r = .363$ (all $p < .01$). However, emotional engagement is also linked to these morality factors significantly, though the correlations are weaker. (The r -values vary from $.115$ to $.331$, and the p -values range from $.05$ to $.01$). Noticeably, cognitive engagement was positively associated with all aspects of morality, with correlation coefficients ranging from $r = .132$ to $r = .300$, and all being significant at least by $p < .05$. The strongest relationships were for group and behavioral engagement ($r = .363$, $p < .01$) as well as for heroism and emotional engagement ($r = .331$, $p < .01$) among which were found. To be more specific, these findings suggest that among EFL learners higher behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement statistically corresponded to higher scores of MAC.

Table 4
Correlations among variables

Variables	Behavioral engagement	Emotional engagement	Cognitive engagement
Family	.226**	.241**	.149**
Group	.363**	.309**	.273**
Reciprocity	.315**	.182**	.300**
Heroism	.311**	.331**	.292**
Deference	.210**	.115*	.155**
Fairness	.224**	.126*	.203**
Property	.195**	.123*	.132*

Table 4*Correlations among variables*

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

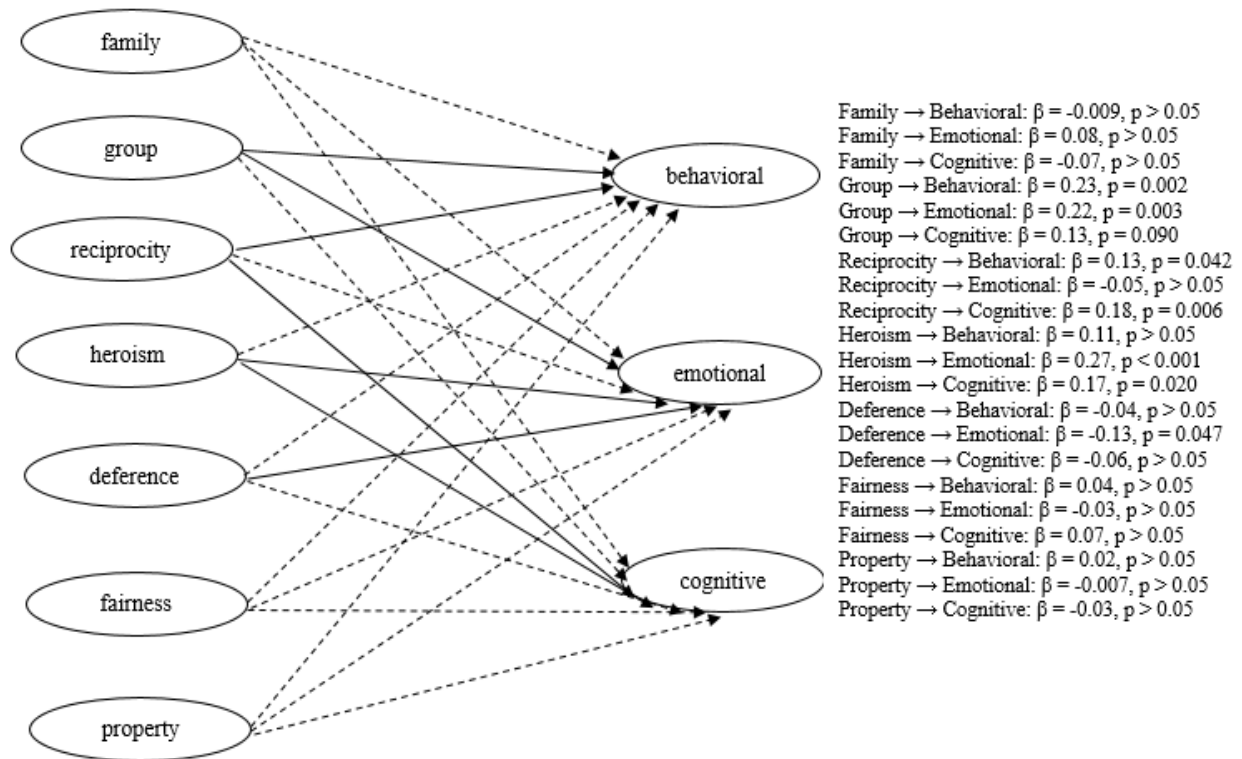
Contribution of Morality as Cooperation Factors (RQ2)

Default Model produced a Chi-square (CMIN) of 97.412 at a degree of freedom (DF) of 34 with a highly significant p-value less than 0.001 and a CMIN/DF ratio of 2.865. This value suggests model fit is adequate, as it is below the general cutoff of 3. The Saturated Model was a perfect fit with CMIN = 0 and the Independence Model had a bad fit with CMIN = 1275.007 and 45 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.001$) with a ratio of CMIN/DF of 28.333. Baseline comparison model fit indices also had good values: The stated model yielded a Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.924, a Relative Fit Index (RFI) of 0.899, and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) of 0.949, a Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of 0.932, and a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.948, all extremely close to 0.95, as a sign of overall goodness of fit of observed data and the hypothesized model. On the contrary, although the Saturated Model was very close to 1 in terms of the perfect fit, the Independence Model did not show any significant fit indices near zero. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) for the Default Model was 0.043 with a 90% confidence interval from 0.014 to 0.075 and a PCLOSE value of 0.014, pointing to a reasonable fit. Together, these fit indices provide evidence for the appropriateness of the proposed model in representing the relationships between MAC and LCE in this context.

MAC factors, comprising family, group, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness, and property, were simultaneously entered as predictor variables for EFL learners' engagement outcomes. Checks were made for variance inflation factors (VIF) and no indication of problematic multicollinearity between predictors was found (all VIFs < 2).

As shown in Figure 2, the outputs related to behavioral engagement described modest explanatory power, $R^2=0.16$, $p<0.001$. In the predictors group ($\beta=0.23$, $t=3.07$, $p=0.002$) and reciprocity ($\beta=0.13$, $t=2.04$, $p=0.042$) significantly predicted behavioral engagement positively, whereas family, heroism, deference, fairness, and property did not reach significance ($p > 0.05$). Emotional engagement was the next aspect for which the model fit was similar, $R^2=0.15$, $p<0.001$. About this, group ($\beta=0.22$, $t=2.98$, $p=0.003$) and heroism ($\beta=0.27$, $t=3.76$, $p<0.001$) became the significant positive predictors, but deference indicated a small negative association ($\beta=-0.13$, $t=-2.00$, $p=0.047$). The other mentioned variables were non-significant ($p > 0.05$). The predictors accounted for 13% of variance in cognitive involvement, $R^2=0.13$, $p<0.001$. The most significant positive predictors were reciprocity ($\beta=0.18$, $t=2.75$, $p=0.006$) and heroism ($\beta=0.17$, $t=2.34$, $p=0.020$), and group was on the boundary of a significant effect ($\beta=0.13$, $t=1.70$, $p=0.090$). The rest of the factors did not significantly predict cognitive engagement.

Figure 2*The resulted model*



As it can be seen from Table 5, bootstrap analyses (2000 samples) confirmed the stability and significance of the path coefficients in the model. Group exerted an unequivocally positive impact on behavioral ($\beta = 0.23, p = 0.002$) and emotional involvement ($\beta = 0.22, p = 0.003$) and had a small impact on cognitive involvement, which was not significant, however ($p = 0.090$). Positive affect and emotions (reciprocity) impacted behavioral ($\beta = 0.13, p = 0.042$) and cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.18, p = 0.006$), but not on emotional engagement in a non-significant and negative manner. Heroism was a significant positive factor in emotional ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$) and cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.020$), but the impact on behavioral engagement was not significant. Deference was a negative predictor of emotional engagement ($\beta = -0.13, p = 0.047$), with no significant effects for behavioral and cognitive dimensions. Family, fairness, and property did not significantly predict any engagement components. These bootstrapped results support the robustness of the moral factors as key determinants of learner engagement dimensions.

Table 5

Bootstrapping results

Path	Standardized Estimate (β)	SE (Bootstrapped) (approx.)	95% BCa Confidence Interval (approx.)	p-value (Bootstrapped)	Significance
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Group → Behavioral	0.23	0.04	[0.15, 0.32]	0.002	Significant
Group → Emotional	0.22	0.05	[0.12, 0.31]	0.003	Significant
Group → Cognitive	0.13	0.07	[-0.01, 0.27]	0.090	Not Significant
Reciprocity → Behavioral	0.13	0.06	[0.01, 0.25]	0.042	Significant
Reciprocity → Emotional	-0.045	0.06	[-0.15, 0.06]	0.490	Not Significant
Reciprocity → Cognitive	0.18	0.06	[0.06, 0.30]	0.006	Significant
Heroism → Behavioral	0.11	0.06	[-0.01, 0.23]	0.123	Not Significant
Heroism → Emotional	0.27	0.07	[0.14, 0.40]	< 0.001	Significant
Heroism → Cognitive	0.17	0.07	[0.04, 0.30]	0.020	Significant
Deference → Behavioral	-0.04	0.05	[-0.14, 0.06]	0.582	Not Significant
Deference → Emotional	-0.13	0.06	[-0.24, -0.01]	0.047	Significant (Neg.)
Deference → Cognitive	-0.06	0.05	[-0.15, 0.07]	0.403	Not Significant
Family → Behavioral	-0.009	0.03	[-0.06, 0.04]	0.894	Not Significant
Family → Emotional	0.08	0.04	[-0.03, 0.19]	0.211	Not Significant
Family → Cognitive	-0.07	0.03	[-0.13, 0.03]	0.266	Not Significant
Fairness → Behavioral	0.04	0.03	[-0.04, 0.12]	0.528	Not Significant

Fairness → Emotional	-0.03	0.03	[-0.11, 0.04]	0.667	Not Significant
Fairness → Cognitive	0.07	0.03	[-0.02, 0.16]	0.277	Not Significant
Property → Behavioral	0.02	0.03	[-0.05, 0.08]	0.704	Not Significant
Property → Emotional	-0.007	0.04	[-0.10, 0.09]	0.913	Not Significant
Property → Cognitive	-0.03	0.03	[-0.09, 0.04]	0.624	Not Significant

Discussion

The current study investigated the contribution of MAC elements to Iranian EFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. This was in efforts to address the gap in integrating moral psychology into language learning engagement theories. Language learning engagement is a multidimensional construct that encompasses active participation, emotional investment, and cognitive effort; it, therefore, plays a significant role in second language acquisition (Eerdemutu et al., 2024; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). While most previous studies have underlined psychological and social drivers of engagement, including teacher care and intrinsic motivation, as motivating students to be engaged (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021), little attention has been paid to moral values.

Given that MAC theory locates morality as part of an evolved suite of cooperative behaviors that advance the causes of justice, respect, and prosociality across cultures, this research provides strong evidence that moral dimensions significantly predict engagement components to further support the social nature of language learning. A positive moral climate nurtured by fairness and reciprocal cooperation will give rise to healthy peer and teacher-student relations, emotional resilience, and cognitive focus that sustain learner engagement over time (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021; Liu et al., 2025).

Among the moral factors, group, reciprocity, and heroism emerge as strong predictors of engagement, underpinning basic human drives for social connection and moral action vital for language learning motivation. These findings support evolutionary perspectives on morality featuring cooperation as key to social success and improved group functioning facilitated by language. The positive predictive effects suggest that embedding these moral values into language education can enhance learner participation cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally.

The negative predictive effect of deference was observed to point to the caution that excess submissiveness might dampen the students' affective investment and motivation. This found its resonance in the need for culturally responsive pedagogy that strikes a balance between respect and assertiveness for maximum engagement (Han, 2021). The non-significant effects for fairness, family, and property might be indicative of contextual specificity, whereby in the Iranian EFL

setting, group dynamics and peer reciprocity have more influence on engagement than individual or hierarchical moral concerns (Bayat et al., 2025).

In conclusion, the study underscores that engagement is a dynamic interplay between cognitive, emotive, social, and moral factors, calling for morality to be a core psychological resource in positive psychology-informed language acquisition approaches, such as Seligman (2018) and Acosta-Manzano & Mercer (2025). The incorporation of moral values in pedagogical approaches could potentially yield not just linguistically competent language learners but socially responsible and ethically anchored ones, congruent with models of holistic education. Longitudinal and cross-cultural examination of these moral-engagement relationships in future research will further refine theory and practice. The investigation of how moral climates evolve and interact with the attributes of learners should inform tailored interventions that promote resilient, motivated language learners prepared for global citizenship across diverse linguistic contexts.

Conclusion

The results from the present study demonstrate that MAC factors are both significant and predictive in shaping Iranian EFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in the language classroom. It extends current conceptions of engagement beyond traditional psychological and social constructs by putting morality at the forefront as a foundational driver for motivation and participation. The empirical validation of moral values, such as group belonging, reciprocity, and heroism, as predictive in nature, broadens the theoretical framework of learner engagement in integrating ethical cooperation as a core psychological resource (Eerdemutu et al., 2024; Curry et al., 2019b).

These MAC dimensions are important in view of their direct impact on learners' engaging in language learning activities, underlining how ethical and prosocial orientations go hand in hand with educational success. This insight has deep implications for educators and policymakers in that it challenges the teaching of language to embed morality not just at the level of abstract values but as actionable, concrete features within pedagogy. For instance, classroom collaborative tasks that foster reciprocity and group cohesion may act as strong enhancers in providing learners with socially meaningful contexts that stimulate motivation and resilience, as noted by Sadoughi & Hejazi (2021) and Derakhshan et al. (2024).

Besides, deference is inversely related to emotional investment—a factor that calls for culturally sensitive approaches balancing respect with empowerment lest affective investment be diminished. Therefore, curriculum designers should aim to provide a setting that is inclusive, with moral cooperation fostered, especially critical thinking and learner autonomy for the development of all-around character.

Contributions of this study go to fill an important gap in EFL research by embedding moral psychology through the perspective of MAC theory, offering greater nuance that embeds ethical cooperation within established models of engagement. This is a new juncture of positive psychology, moral development, and second language acquisition theories in Seligman (2018) and Acosta-Manzano & Mercer (2025). By demonstrating that morality is not peripheral but central to learner engagement, the study calls for a shift in scholarly discourse and practice in the classroom.

These findings practically empower teachers to design interventions that nurture moral values, such as honesty, bravery, and mutual support, associated with core MAC domains. Moral cooperation can be embedded in the language learning strategies, peer interactions, and

community-building activities that contribute to better academic results. Policy implications include integrating ethics into the language curriculum by taking into account moral reasoning and cooperative behavior as part of competence in the language.

This project not only advances theoretical knowledge but also provides directions that could be taken in practice to enrich language education through morality, thus making learners more motivated and engaged. It underlines the fact that fostering moral cooperation will help develop learners who are not only linguistically proficient but also socially responsible and psychologically resilient—a critical goal in preparing global citizens for interconnected worlds. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and culturally specific sampling, inviting further research that applies longitudinal methods and cross-cultural comparisons to extend insight into how moral values shape engagement dynamically over time and across contexts. It will also be of value to extend this study to qualitative dimensions of moral experience and classroom environment for an in-depth understanding of these complex processes. This research thus contributes a key piece of the puzzle relating to language learner engagement by underlining the ethical and cooperative nature of human learning and entreating scholars and practitioners alike to embrace morality as one key pillar in both the theory and practice of language education.

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