Integrating Ethics and Morality in the Teaching Profession

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Abstract

Integrating ethical principles into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching is vital for fostering fairness, respect, and moral development. This paper reviews educational ethics literature and proposes practical strategies for embedding ethics in three areas of classroom practice: student assessment, curriculum development, and teacher–student relationships. Beyond synthesis, it introduces a critical framework examining the tensions between deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics approaches, particularly in cross-cultural EFL contexts. A thematic analysis of scholarly contributions highlights practices such as transparent grading rubrics, culturally sensitive material selection, and equitable interpersonal dynamics that support integrity and mutual respect. The paper further argues that ethical integration should extend to teacher education programs and institutional curriculum design. By presenting concrete guidelines, this study bridges the gap between ethical theory and practice in language teaching and offers actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers seeking to align pedagogy with ethical imperatives.

Keywords: Assessment; Curriculum; Education; Ethics; EFL; Teaching

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving field of education, the integration of ethics and morality into teaching practice is fundamental to cultivating fairness, respect, and integrity in the classroom. Ethics refers to the principles that guide human actions and help determine what is right or wrong in certain situations (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013). Morality, while closely

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related, is shaped by cultural, religious, and personal values that influence an individual's judgement and behaviour (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001). Together, these concepts form the basis of teachers' professional responsibilities and influence how they interact with students and manage classroom dynamics.

This paper examines three important theoretical approaches to ethics that influence the moral decisions of teachers: Deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. Deontological ethics emphasizes adherence to duties and principles regardless of outcomes, such as maintaining academic honesty, even when this is difficult (Sabbagh, 2020). Consequentialism, on the other hand, evaluates actions based on their outcomes and promotes decisions that maximize overall utility, including the happiness and well-being of students (Mill, 1863; Noddings, 2003). Virtue ethics focuses on the development of moral character traits — such as fairness, kindness and practical wisdom — and positions teachers as role models who exemplify integrity and care in their daily practice (Carr, 2005; Sockett, 1993).

Although the importance of ethics in the classroom is widely recognized, many educators find it difficult to translate ethical principles into concrete classroom practices (Strike & Soltis, 2009). This challenge is particularly evident in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), where teachers must grapple with different cultural expectations and potential tensions between global pedagogical standards and local norms. While the existing literature often summarizes these principles, it lacks a critical analysis of how these fundamental ethical frameworks may conflict or interact in the specific, cross-cultural context of EFL teaching. This paper aims to fill this gap by not only summarizing strategies but also providing a deeper, comparative analysis of deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics, thus offering a new framework for resolving ethical dilemmas in the language classroom. To address this gap, this paper explores how ethical principles can be operationalized in three core areas of classroom practice: Assessment, curriculum development, and interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. By summarizing the findings from the existing literature, it aims to offer practical strategies for fostering a classroom environment based on fairness, respect and moral development. At the same time, it critically examines the tensions that arise between universal ethical principles and local cultural values.

2. Literature Review

Numerous research studies have addressed the integration of ethics and morality in the classroom, reflecting the growing recognition of their importance for teacher behavior and student development. Studies consistently emphasize that ethical awareness in the classroom promotes not only academic achievement but also moral development, helping students to develop into responsible and empathetic human beings.

Recent research shows that professional ethics is central to teacher effectiveness. Ninfa and Osias (2024) show that ethical considerations significantly influence teachers' attitudes, behavior and performance and advocate for professional development programs that equip educators with practical tools for ethical decision-making. Similarly, Safarpour (2024) highlights the need to include ethics training in teacher preparation programs, noting that such training prepares educators for the moral challenges associated with classroom practice.

Another important strand of literature focuses on the inclusive ethic, which prioritizes the creation of classrooms that recognize and respect student diversity. Damiani, Brancato and Gomez Paloma (2024) argue that inclusive ethical literacy is essential for promoting equitable learning environments, especially in multicultural contexts. Their work is in line with Zając's (2023) concept of an 'ethic of care', which understands moral education as relational and based on empathy, respect and kindness.

Research has also examined the practical challenges of implementing ethical guidelines. Fraga da Silva, Ishii and Krasilchik (2023) report that while teachers generally appreciate codes of ethics, they often struggle to translate the abstract principles into classroom practice. Rezaee and Esfandyari (2023), in a mixed-method study of Iranian EFL teachers, also find that although educators recognize the importance of values education, they have difficulty integrating it effectively into language teaching. These findings emphasize the need for targeted support and training to bridge the gap between ethical awareness and application.

Earlier work continues to influence current discourse. Freeman (2000) argued that ethics should be a fundamental part of teacher education, not just an optional add-on, and argued in favor of curricula that prepare teachers to deal with moral dilemmas. Tirri and Kuusisto (2022) further emphasize the role of personal reflection and values formation in ethics education, pointing out that continuous professional reflection is crucial for coping with complex teaching situations.

Overall, these studies show a consensus on the importance of incorporating ethical principles into the teaching. Recurring themes include the centrality of teacher education, the importance of inclusive

and caring practices, and the ongoing challenge of translating ethical ideals into practical strategies. However, a critical analysis reveals a significant gap: much of the literature presents these themes in isolation and fails to critically engage with the inherent tensions between them. For instance, the potential conflict between a deontological duty to enforce universal academic integrity rules and a consequentialist aim to foster a positive, low-stress learning environment is rarely unpacked.

Furthermore, while tensions between Western conceptions of ethics (e.g., individual autonomy in consequentialism) and local cultural/religious values (e.g., collectivism, respect for authority) in EFL contexts are acknowledged (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001), they are not sufficiently explored with concrete examples of how these tensions manifest in curriculum choices or assessment practices. Much of the existing literature remains either theoretical or largely focused on general education. Little research addresses the practical application of ethics in EFL contexts, where cultural diversity and language barriers pose particular ethical challenges. This study attempts to fill this gap by summarizing the existing evidence and proposing actionable guidelines tailored to EFL teaching, with a critical lens on resolving these theoretical and practical contradictions.

3. Methodology

This study uses a literature-based research design to investigate how ethical principles can be effectively integrated into English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching practice. Rather than collecting primary data, the study synthesizes existing scholarly work to identify practical strategies for incorporating ethics into assessment, curriculum design and teacher–student interaction. To enhance scholarly rigor, this study adopted a systematic approach to its thematic analysis, moving beyond a simple summary to a critical interpretive synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

Relevant studies were identified through extensive searches of academic databases, including ERIC and Scopus, using keywords such as 'ethics in teaching', 'educational ethics', 'EFL pedagogy', 'moral dilemmas in teaching', and 'cross-cultural ethics in education'. To ensure relevance and quality, studies were selected based on the following criteria: (a) explicit focus on ethics or morality in education; (b) applicability to language teaching or general pedagogy; and (c) publication in peer-reviewed journals or reputable academic sources. Both recent contributions (e.g., Ninfa & Osias, 2024; Damiani et al., 2024) and foundational works (e.g., Freeman, 2000; Sockett, 1993) were considered to provide historical and contemporary perspectives.

A total of twenty-five key sources that fulfil these criteria were subjected to a systematic thematic analysis. The analysis followed a structured coding procedure. First, deductive codes were established based on the three primary ethical frameworks (deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics). Then, an inductive coding process was applied to identify emergent themes and sub-themes from the literature, such as "transparency in grading," "cultural material selection," "care ethics boundaries," and "ethical technology use." Sources that were purely theoretical without practical application or that focused on non-educational contexts were excluded from the final analytical phase. Each study was systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes, such as fairness in assessment, culturally responsive curriculum development, and the role of caring in teacher–student relationships. These themes were then critically analyzed for points of convergence, conflict, and gap, particularly focusing on how different ethical frameworks would approach each theme in an EFL setting. These themes formed the basis for the development of practical guidelines to help teachers integrate ethical principles into everyday classroom practice. By anchoring the analysis in the established literature, the study ensures that its recommendations are theoretically grounded and adaptable to different educational contexts.

4. Results

4.1. Integration of Ethics in Teaching Profession

The integration of ethics into the teaching profession requires the translation of abstract moral principles into concrete practices that guide daily classroom interactions. In EFL contexts, where linguistic diversity and cultural differences characterise the learning environment, ethical considerations are particularly important (Rezaee & Esfandyari, 2023). This section draws on the key frameworks of deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics (Noddings, 2003; Sabbagh, 2020; Sockett, 1993) and outlines practical strategies for embedding ethical principles in four core areas: Assessment, Curriculum Development, Interpersonal Relationships and Professional Competence. This section expands on the original by providing a deeper comparative analysis of these frameworks, illustrating their applications and potential conflicts with hypothetical examples from EFL scenarios.

4.2. Ethical Principles in Student Assessment

Assessment practices have a significant impact on students' academic experiences and their perceptions of fairness. Ethical assessment should

emphasize transparency, impartiality and respect for the diverse needs of learners. Different frameworks prioritize different aspects.

4.2.1. Fair and Unbiased Evaluation

Developing clear grading rubrics and communicating them to students ensures transparency and minimises bias (Sabbagh, 2020), fulfilling a deontological duty to uphold fair procedures. Anonymous grading, where possible, further supports this impartiality. A virtue ethics approach would complement this by focusing on the teacher's character, cultivating the virtues of fairness and impartiality in every judgment.

4.2.2. Addressing Academic Integrity

An ethical assessment requires proactive measures against plagiarism and fraud. A strict deontological stance might demand uniform punishment for all infractions. However, a consequentialist would evaluate the outcome of such an action; harsh punishment might deter cheating but could also create an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Therefore, in addition to using plagiarism detection tools, teachers should explicitly teach the principles of academic integrity and promote a classroom culture that values honesty rather than relying solely on punitive measures (Strike & Soltis, 2009), an approach that blends duty (deontology) with the aim of fostering a positive learning environment (consequentialism) and cultivating honesty (virtue).

4.2.3. Balancing Standardized and Individualized Assessment

The combination of standardized tests with alternative assessment methods—such as projects or presentations—accommodates different learning styles and promotes equal opportunities (Noddings, 2003). This satisfies a consequentialist aim to maximize positive outcomes for diverse learners while also fulfilling a virtue ethicist's call for practical wisdom (phronesis) in judging each student's abilities holistically.

4.2.4. Constructive Feedback

Timely, detailed and personalized feedback respects the student's dignity and encourages growth. This practice is a hallmark of virtue ethics, exemplifying care and kindness. From a consequentialist view, this type of feedback leads to better learning outcomes. Feedback should emphasize strengths, highlight areas for improvement and encourage reflective learning rather than focusing solely on grades.

4.3. Ethical Curriculum Development

The curriculum design in EFL lessons must be balanced between respecting local cultural norms and conveying global perspectives to the students. This is a primary site for ethical tension between frameworks.

4.3.1. Culturally Responsive Material Selection

Teachers should select materials that reflect different English-speaking cultures while taking into account the values of the host community (Damiani et al., 2024). This approach promotes intercultural competence without alienating learners. A consequentialist would justify this because it leads to student engagement and intercultural learning. However, a virtue ethicist would argue that this must be done with the virtue of practical wisdom, carefully navigating sensitive topics.

4.3.2. Addressing Controversial Topics

When discussing sensitive topics such as gender roles or social norms, teachers should academically frame the conversations and encourage respectful dialogue. Creating a safe environment in the classroom allows for critical discussion without undermining cultural values (Zając, 2023). This requires balancing the deontological principle of academic freedom with the consequentialist concern for student well-being and community respect.

4.3.3. Balancing Academic Freedom and Community Standards

Educators must find the ethical balance between pedagogical autonomy and institutional or societal expectations and ensure that curriculum choices remain respectful while promoting critical thinking (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001). This balance is the essence of resolving conflicts between deontological (duty to teach truth), consequentialist (avoiding harmful outcomes), and virtue ethics (practical wisdom, respect) frameworks.

4.4. Ethical Interpersonal Relationships

Ethical teaching goes beyond pedagogy and also includes interaction with students, colleagues, and the school community.

4.4.1. Professional Boundaries and Care

Teachers should cultivate supportive relationships based on empathy and fairness while maintaining professional boundaries (Carr, 2005). The ethic of care emphasizes building trust without crossing boundaries that compromise objectivity or propriety. This is a key example of virtue ethics

(care) being tempered by deontological rules (professional codes of conduct).

4.4.2. Confidentiality and Privacy

Respect for students' personal information is essential to building trust and ensuring ethical behavior. Sensitive matters should be handled discreetly and only shared with those directly involved in providing support. This is both a deontological duty (upholding confidentiality) and a consequentialist necessity (breaching trust damages the student-teacher relationship).

4.4.3. Fairness and Equity

Equal treatment of all students, regardless of background or ability, underpins ethical practice. Clear and consistent marking practices help to ensure fairness and promote confidence in the learning environment. A deontologist sees this as a duty. A virtue ethicist sees it as the virtue of justice. A consequentialist supports it because it creates a positive and productive classroom environment.

4.5. Personal Competence and Ethical Growth

Ethical professionalism requires constant reflection and professional development in order to adapt to new challenges in the field of education.

4.5.1. Continuous Professional Learning

Participation in workshops, training and scientific research enables teachers to keep abreast of pedagogical and ethical developments (Freeman, 2000). Ethical competence develops in parallel with professional skills. This commitment to growth is itself a virtue (virtue ethics) that leads to better teaching outcomes (consequentialism).

4.5.2. Ethics in Technology Use

As digital tools become an integral part of the teaching, educators must protect student privacy, seek permission before sharing student work, and ensure equitable access to technology resources (Safarpour, 2024). This involves a deontological adherence to privacy rules, a consequentialist aim to prevent harm, and the virtuous character trait of digital citizenship.

By operationalizing ethical principles in all these areas, teachers can create a learning environment that is characterized by fairness, respect and moral growth. Such integration not only improves academic outcomes, but also contributes to students' broader ethical development and prepares them for responsible participation in society.

5. Discussion

This study emphasizes the importance of incorporating ethical principles into the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in order to promote fairness, respect and moral development. By synthesizing existing research evidence, it offers practical strategies for integrating ethics into assessment, curriculum design, interpersonal relationships and professional competence. These findings are consistent with previous research that emphasizes that ethical teaching promotes both classroom dynamics and students' personal development (Ninfa & Osias, 2024; Zając, 2023).

The primary original contribution of this analysis is its critical comparative examination of ethical frameworks within the EFL context, moving beyond summary to provide a novel lens for understanding ethical dilemmas. The analysis reveals several important findings. First, fair and transparent assessment practices—such as grading by rubric and anonymous assessments—directly address concerns about bias and academic honesty and thus meet deontological commitments to duty and fairness (Sabbagh, 2020). However, as shown, these practices are strengthened when complemented by the consequentialist aim of fostering a positive learning culture and the virtue of teacher fairness. Second, culturally responsive curriculum design reflects consequentialist considerations by promoting positive student outcomes through inclusive and context-sensitive materials (Damiani et al., 2024; Rezaee & Esfandyari, 2023). Yet, it is the virtue of practical wisdom and a deontological respect for local norms that prevents this approach from becoming culturally imperialistic. Third, emphasizing teacher–student relationships based on caring and mutual respect exemplifies virtue ethics and reinforces the teacher's role as a moral role model (Carr, 2005; Sockett, 1993). This discussion is enriched by analyzing how the ethic of care (virtue) must be bounded by deontological professional codes to maintain appropriate relationships.

Despite these contributions, the study also points to ongoing challenges. A recurring theme in the literature is the gap between ethical awareness and practical implementation (Strike & Soltis, 2009). While teachers recognize the importance of ethical behavior, they lack concrete strategies or institutional support to implement these principles in daily practice. Cultural norms, time pressures, and institutional constraints can further complicate ethical decision-making (Ball & Wilson, 1996). These challenges emphasize the need for systemic approaches, including teacher training and curriculum policies that explicitly incorporate ethics (Safarpour, 2024). The framework provided here—contrasting and

integrating deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics—offers a practical heuristic for teachers to navigate these complex challenges, moving them from abstract awareness to actionable decision-making.

6. Conclusion

Integrating ethical principles into EFL teaching is essential for creating classrooms that promote both academic learning and moral development. This paper contributes to this topic by bringing together different theoretical and empirical perspectives to propose actionable guidelines that are applicable to core areas of teaching practice. Its key original contribution lies in its critical framework for analyzing the application and tension between core ethical theories in cross-cultural EFL settings, a nuanced approach lacking in much of the current literature. These guidelines encourage teachers to promote fairness in assessment, design culturally responsive curricula, foster respectful relationships, and engage in professional development.

While this literature-based approach offers valuable insights, it is limited by its dependence on secondary sources. Future research should empirically test the effectiveness of these strategies, for example, through classroom interventions, teacher surveys, or mixed methods studies that examine students' perceptions of ethical practices. Specifically, future studies can empirically validate the proposed framework by investigating how teachers currently navigate ethical dilemmas using these lenses. They may conduct cross-cultural comparative research to explore how the tensions between ethical frameworks are resolved differently across various cultural contexts. Such studies would provide stronger evidence of how ethical frameworks in different cultural and institutional settings lead to better educational outcomes.

Ultimately, incorporating ethics into the teaching not only improves classroom interactions, but also provides students with the moral awareness and critical judgement they need to navigate complex social situations. In this way, educators contribute to the overarching goal of developing responsible, empathetic and ethically grounded individuals (Hursthouse, 1999).

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