

INVESTIGATING VIETNAMESE EFL HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHING MORAL VALUES

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Article history

Received: 04/3/2024; Received in revised form: 29/4/2024; Accepted: 08/5/2024

Abstract

Families, schools, and society in Vietnam are paying more attention to moral education. The current national general education program, in particular, strives to promote students' knowledge, skills, and moral qualities in order to better prepare them for globalization in the twenty-first century. It also mandates all educators, teachers integrate moral values into the curricula and lessons. This study aims to investigate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' attitudes towards teaching moral values in various high schools. Twenty-one Vietnamese EFL high school teachers from a province in the Mekong Delta participated in the study. Data were collected from a Google-Form survey comprising 14 closed and open-ended questions based on van Aalderen-Smeets et al.'s (2012) and Ualesi and Ward's (2018) multi-dimensional framework. The findings showed the participants' positive attitudes toward teaching moral values, and there was almost no significant difference in the attitudes of teachers regarding gender, level of education, and teaching contexts. However, the findings revealed that approximately 81 % of the respondents encountered difficulties when infusing moral values into EFL teaching, primarily relating to teachers' perceptions and contextual factors. Based on the findings, some conclusions and pedagogical recommendations have been made.

Keywords: *EFL teachers' attitude, moral education, teaching moral values, Vietnamese high schools.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52714/dthu.13.7.2024.1338>.

Cite: Nguyen, T. N. H., Huynh, H. H., & Nguyen, T. B. N. (2024). Investigating Vietnamese EFL high school teachers' attitudes toward teaching moral values. *Dong Thap University Journal of Science*, 13(7), 60-69. <https://doi.org/10.52714/dthu.13.7.2024.1338>.

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NGHIÊN CỨU THÁI ĐỘ CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC GIẢNG DẠY GIÁ TRỊ ĐẠO ĐỨC Ở CÁC TRƯỜNG TRUNG HỌC PHỔ THÔNG TẠI VIỆT NAM

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Lịch sử bài báo

Ngày nhận: 04/3/2024; Ngày nhận chỉnh sửa: 29/4/2024; Ngày duyệt đăng: 08/5/2024

Tóm tắt

Gia đình, nhà trường và xã hội Việt Nam đang quan tâm nhiều hơn đến việc giáo dục đạo đức. Đặc biệt, mục tiêu của chương trình giáo dục phổ thông quốc gia hiện nay là nâng cao kiến thức, kỹ năng và phẩm chất đạo đức của học sinh, chuẩn bị tốt hơn cho quá trình toàn cầu hóa trong thế kỷ XXI. Chương trình này yêu cầu tất cả các nhà giáo dục, giáo viên lồng ghép các giá trị đạo đức vào bài học. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu thái độ của giáo viên tiếng Anh (EFL) trung học phổ thông đối với việc giảng dạy các giá trị đạo đức. 21 giáo viên Tiếng Anh trung học phổ thông từ một tỉnh ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long đã tham gia nghiên cứu. Bảng khảo sát, gồm 14 câu hỏi đóng và mở, được thiết kế dựa trên khung lý thuyết của van Aalderen-Smeets và cộng sự (2012), Ualesi và Ward (2018). Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua phần mềm Google-Form. Kết quả cho thấy giáo viên có thái độ tích cực đối với việc giảng dạy các giá trị đạo đức và hầu như không có sự khác biệt đáng kể ở thái độ của các giáo viên khi so về giới tính, trình độ học vấn và bối cảnh giảng dạy. Tuy nhiên, kết quả nghiên cứu cũng cho thấy rằng khoảng 81% gặp khó khăn khi lồng ghép các giá trị đạo đức vào việc giảng dạy, chủ yếu liên quan đến nhận thức của giáo viên và các yếu tố bối cảnh giảng dạy. Dựa trên kết quả tìm được, một số kết luận và kiến nghị sư phạm đã được đề xuất.

Từ khóa: Giáo dục đạo đức, giảng dạy giá trị đạo đức, thái độ của giáo viên Tiếng Anh, trường phổ thông ở Việt Nam

1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, the speed of technological advancement has increased, and our world is more globalized than ever before. Nevertheless, daily life has become a living pandemic of moral crisis, dilemma and failure where a lot of violence, destruction and deaths are seen here and there. In response to such a situation, moral education in the twenty-first century continues to be one of the central pressing and eternally important elements of life, work and education (Chazan, 2022) in order to guide people to do the right things in new situations. On the other hand, Noddings (2010) points out that globalization enables people all over the world to communicate with one another instantly, and we may live and work regularly with people whose values may differ from our own. For this reason, people from different cultural backgrounds may face unpredicted challenges in social life in the globalized world. As the future is unpredictable, we need to be open and ready for it (OECD, 2018). In this regard, Siddiqui and Soomro (2022) state that schools may successfully instill moral principles and values in learners through a supportive learning environment to prepare learners to solve problems that have not been anticipated. Schools should be the places where each student can develop as a whole person with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (OECD, 2018).

In the context of Vietnam, families, schools, and society are paying more attention to moral education in response to the Prime Minister's call for the enhancement of moral education for Vietnamese high school learners and university students (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2019). In addition, the Ministry of Education and Training (2018) released the current national general education program which strives to promote students' knowledge, skills, and moral qualities in order to better prepare them for globalization in the twenty-first century. It also mandates all educators, teachers integrate moral values into the curricula and lessons. In English language teaching, moral values are very important to provide a content-based environment for students to learn the language as well as the ethics. Akbari and Tajik (2012) indicate that EFL classrooms incorporate the cross-cultural interface between the target culture and students' home culture, so teaching moral values in EFL classes is much more complex than in other

subjects. Furthermore, teachers' attitudes may have a great influence on teachers' decision-making and implementation (Mohamad et al., 2020; Pickens, 2005). It is therefore necessary to examine EFL high school teachers' attitudes towards teaching moral values. However, very little research in Vietnamese context has examined this subject.

The present study aimed to inquire into Vietnamese EFL teachers' attitudes toward teaching moral values in various high schools in the context of the Mekong Delta. The present paper starts with a literature review on the definition of key terms and the purpose of teaching moral values in EFL classes. Then, the theoretical framework of the study is described in detail. Some preliminary results are provided, and conclusions and pedagogical recommendations have been made for further research. In order to address the aim, the current study adheres to answering the following question: What are Vietnamese EFL high school teachers' attitudes towards teaching moral values?

2. Review of literature

2.1. The definition of key terms

2.1.1. Teaching moral values

The emphasis on moral education has evolved in many countries in recent years, and it has become an essential part of teaching (Veugelers, 2010). In this sense, Shaaban (2005, p. 201) defined moral education as the "strategic teaching of basic values and principles that would develop in learners as a sense of social and personal responsibility". In other words, through moral education, learners will learn basic values and principles and become more aware of their responsibility to the society. Similarly, Campbell (2008) states that moral education may foster shared emotions with others and make one devoted to their own responsibilities and deeds.

Moral education includes teaching moral values. Halstead and Taylor (2000) defined values as the guiding principles and essential beliefs that serve as general guidelines for behavior and as the criteria by which specific activities are judged as being good and desirable. Lickona (2004) illustrates that values are visible. Value consists of good nature as a form of appropriate moral behavior. To a similar extent, Veugelers (2010) sees moral values as values about doing something good. Based on

the previous concepts, in this study, teaching moral values refers to teaching students values that guide them to behave morally.

2.1.2. Definition of attitude

The concept of attitude has been defined by a number of leading scholars in different fields such as psychology, Mathematic education and Science education. Allport (1935, p. 810) defined an attitude as “a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence on the individual’s response to all objects and situations to which it is related”. From this point, attitude can be seen as unobservable because it is formed inside someone’s head. However, attitudes can be formed through social interactions and greatly impact a person’s behavior. More particularly, Pickens (2005) defined attitude as a construct including three components: an affect (a feeling), cognition (a thought or belief), and behavior (an action). In other words, attitudes help us define how we see situations, as well as define how we behave toward the situation or object. Similar to Pickens (2005), Cherry (2018) indicated that attitude comprises three components of cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Specifically, a person’s attitude refers to his/her thoughts and beliefs about the subject, how the object, person, issue, or event makes him/her feel, and how his/her attitude influences his/her behavior.

In Mathematic education, Di Martino (2016) regards attitude as an interpretive instrument to understand the reasons for intentional actions: intentional actions involve complex relationships between affective and cognitive aspects. In his study, Di Martino (2016) points out that there is a causal relationship between beliefs, emotions and behavior. For instance, a causal relationship between negative emotions and failing behavior is implicitly assumed and vice versa.

In Science education, van Aalderen-Smeets et al. (2012) argue that the construct of attitude is multidimensional with several underlying attributes. They divide the construct of attitude into three dimensions: cognitive beliefs, affective states, and perceived control, and each dimension includes sub-components. Specifically, cognitive beliefs are divided into three sub-components: perceived relevance, perceived difficulty, and gender beliefs. The affective dimension involves feelings related to

teaching science, divided into sub-components, both positive and negative. How much control a teacher perceives they have over their teaching is described as perceived control. The two sub-components of this dimension are self-efficacy and context dependency.

Based on the previous definitions, in this study, EFL teachers’ attitude toward teaching moral values is defined as a multidimensional construct, referring to the teacher’s belief about the importance of teaching moral values and the difficulty of integrating moral values in EFL lessons, his/her feelings related to teaching moral values and how much control the teacher perceives he/she has over EFL teaching.

2.2. Factors affecting attitude

Attitude can be formed through learning, modeling others, and our direct experiences with people and situations, and in turn attitude can influence our decisions, guide our behavior, and impact what we selectively remember (Pickens, 2005). Likewise, Cherry (2018) proposes social factors and learning as the two key factors that may impact someone’s attitude. Social roles relate to how people are expected to behave in a particular role or context whereas social norms involve society’s rules for what behaviors are considered appropriate. On the other hand, attitudes can be learned in a variety of ways. Particularly, a person may form his/her attitude toward something by observing the people around. For instance, when admiring someone who greatly shows a particular attitude, people are more likely to develop the same beliefs. It can thus be inferred that in the field of English language teaching, EFL teachers’ learning and teaching experiences as well as contextual factors that may become influential factors in EFL teachers’ attitudes toward teaching moral values in the classes.

2.3. The purpose of teaching moral values in the EFL class

The aims of moral education in the national general education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018) is to develop young Vietnamese generations who are qualified and able to adapt to the new requirements in the era of globalization. Through all the subjects of the curriculum, including English as a foreign language, core values of morality are presented, namely patriotism, compassion, diligence,

honesty, and responsibility. These values are the main goals for moral education in Vietnam in the coming years.

In general, Sari (2013) contends that education is the best way to teach moral values to students. Moral values can be put as a part of curriculum at school. The teacher also has an important part to teach moral values or character building to their students because he/she can impart values to the lesson topic or activity in the class. What is more, a teacher is a moral agent in the sense that almost everything a teacher does can carry a moral import (Nash 2005). A teacher's moral agency is revealed in various ways such as in the selection of textbooks, in the use of instructional strategies, in the way classroom activities are organized, in the teaching style, in cultivating student relations, or in responding to conflicts generated by students and peers.

In EFL classes, moral values are accessible and very important to provide a content-based environment for students to learn the language as well as the ethics. According to Akbari and Tajik (2012), EFL lessons are much more intricate than other subjects because EFL classrooms incorporate the cross-cultural interface between the target culture and students' home culture. In other words, the EFL teacher is responsible for facilitating learners' contact with the target culture, while regarding learners' home culture. Akbari and Tajik (2012) argue that the interface of the two cultures has a significant impact on the moral dimensions of language teaching. It means that teaching EFL has a major impact on the moral dimensions because English teachers not only teach English for the sake of the language itself but also introduce moral contents and internalize the students with moral values.

2.4. Theoretical framework

Believing that attitude is a multidimensional construct, we adapted van Aalderen-Smeets et al.'s (2012) framework in order to explore EFL high school teachers' attitudes toward teaching moral values. Based on that, the conceptual framework of this study was constructed with three main dimensions: cognitive beliefs, affective states, and perceived control (see in Figure 1). Further explanations about the components of the framework are made based on Ualesi and Ward's (2018) outline of the Multi-Dimensional Framework.

In this respect, according to Ualesi and Ward (2018), perceived relevance, perceived difficulty, and gender beliefs make up cognitive beliefs. Here, perceived relevance refers to EFL teacher's beliefs about the importance of teaching moral values; perceived difficulty is used to describe beliefs about the difficulty of teaching moral values, and gender beliefs as the possible difference between male and female EFL teachers' perceptions about teaching moral values. The affective dimension is made up of both positive and negative sub-components that are associated with teaching moral values. The delight of imparting moral values is linked to positive feelings, whereas fear and anxiety are linked to negative feelings about teaching moral values. These feelings can exist at the same time; for example, a teacher may take pleasure in imparting moral principles while also feeling anxious about doing so (ibid). Perceived control refers to the degree of control EFL teachers perceive they have over their teaching moral values. This dimension has two sub-components: self-efficacy and context dependency. The way EFL teachers view their own their own ability to teach moral values is correlated with their level of self-efficacy. EFL teachers' internal factors, such as skills, knowledge, or experience, may have an impact on their self-efficacy. A subcategory called context dependency focuses on external factors that influence EFL teachers' sense of being in control and make it simple or difficult it is to teach moral values. How much control EFL teachers perceive they have over their teaching moral values is described as perceived control. The two sub-components of this dimension are self-efficacy and context dependency. Self-efficacy relates to EFL teachers' perception of their own ability to teach moral values. Internal factors such as abilities, knowledge, or experience might influence EFL teachers' self-efficacy. Context dependency is a sub-category that focuses on external factors that influence EFL teachers' perception of being in control and making it easier or harder to teach moral values.

To put it briefly, the three dimensions of an EFL teacher's attitude towards teaching moral values are interconnected and impact the teacher's behavioural intention to teach moral values, which might or might not come into action. In other words, attitude predicts behaviour and behavioural intention.

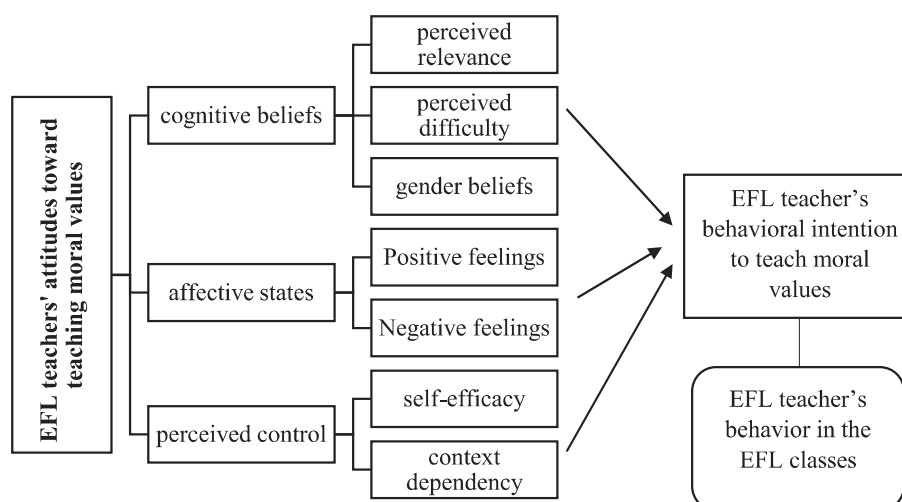


Figure 1. The theoretical framework of EFL teachers' attitudes toward teaching moral values

Source: Adapted from van Aalderen-Smeets et al.'s (2012) and Ualesi & Ward (2018).

2.5. Related studies about EFL teachers' attitudes towards teaching moral values

Several studies have examined EFL teachers' attitudes toward the incorporation of moral values in EFL lessons (Divéki, 2018; Nova, 2017; Syafitri & Nurjamin, 2021). Divéki (2018) conducted a study to explore Hungarian EFL teachers' attitudes toward the incorporation of controversial issues into their lessons. Thirty-five participants completed a small-scale questionnaire to validate a research instrument that is to be used in the author's main study. The findings revealed predominantly positive attitudes from the participants. Furthermore, it seems that teachers deal with a wide range of controversial topics quite frequently, mostly because they take their students' interest into consideration. This suggests that students can be considered as a contextual factor that may influence EFL teachers' incorporation of controversial issues into their lessons.

Character education becomes a major concern in the national education system in Indonesian context. Syafitri and Nurjamin (2021) conducted their study to investigate an EFL teacher's voice toward the inculcation of the character values. The participant involved in this case study was an English teacher in tenth grade who had seventeen years of experience in teaching English. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview and documented in the form of a lesson plan. The results showed that the teacher put the character values on the lesson plan.

Second, the teacher had a good understanding of the importance of character values as implied in teaching English. She believed that internalizing character education in teaching English had a good impact on the students' achievement, but also students' character development. Third, the teacher preferred to use an implicit strategy in inculcating the values in every learning activity.

Nova (2017) implemented a study to investigate Indonesian EFL teachers' implementation of character education and the obstacles they faced in inserting character education into the EFL teaching and learning process. Thirty-four EFL teachers coming from different institutions filled in the survey. The findings revealed that the EFL teachers have inserted character education in classrooms with various frequencies and most of them inserted character education with both explicit and implicit modes. The explicit mode strategies used by the EFL teachers include: inserting the character values in teaching and learning materials; giving lectures on certain character values; giving advice on having a good character; giving examples of good character values briefly; and having a teacher-students' discussion on character values in the classroom. On the other hand, the implicit mode strategies used in the classroom include: asking the students to work in groups or in pairs; conducting a real action of character education in the classroom; setting a rule in assignment; being a model of its value; having game; asking the students

to learn independently; solving real case problem; having a small talk outside the lesson; and telling an inspiring story. However, they faced several obstacles coming from three major aspects; they are the teachers' lack of knowledge of character values, having little experience in teaching character, and students' less effort in learning. From the findings, most of the teachers inserted character education into EFL teaching. It can be therefore inferred that they have relatively positive attitudes toward teaching moral values.

In a nutshell, although the reviewed related studies investigated EFL teachers' attitudes toward teaching moral values or their behavior of teaching moral values, almost no studies have analyzed the EFL teachers' attitudes based on a theoretical framework. In addition, very little research has been found in Vietnamese high school contexts where EFL teachers are required to infuse moral values into their lessons in response to the 2018 national curriculum. Hence, this current study was conducted to fill the gap in the context.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted in a context of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam and 21 Vietnamese EFL teachers (4 males and 17 females) who were teaching EFL in different high schools were selected to respond to this questionnaire. Most of them have over 10 years of teaching experience. Their age ranged from 33 to 52 years old, and 6 out of 21 have a Master degree in English language education.

3.2. Instruments

A Google-Form survey on attitudes toward teaching moral values, comprising 14 closed and open-ended questions was designed based on van Aalderen-Smeets et al.'s (2012) multi-dimensional framework to collect the data. The multiple-choice questions are about the teachers' cognitive beliefs, their feeling, and their perceived control over teaching moral values.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered from the survey as the primary source. The participating teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire to provide relevant

background information and their attitudes toward teaching moral values. In this study, 30 Vietnamese EFL teachers coming from different high schools in a province of the Mekong Delta were conveniently selected and contacted to participate in the study. Out of the 30 EFL teachers, 21 filled-in questionnaires were returned. The total of 21 EFL teachers consisted of 4 males and 17 females. The EFL teachers' responses were then analyzed and interpreted based on van Aalderen-Smeets et al.'s (2012) the multidimensional framework of attitude.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings from the questionnaire showed that the participants' positive attitudes toward teaching moral values, and there was almost no significant difference in the attitudes of teachers regarding gender, level of education, and teaching contexts. However, the findings revealed that approximately 81% of the respondents encountered difficulties when infusing moral values into EFL teaching, primarily relating to teachers' perceptions and contextual factors. The data about the teachers' cognitive beliefs, affective states and perceived control over teaching moral values are specifically revealed.

4.1. Cognitive beliefs

The data revealed three overarching themes associated with EFL teachers' cognitive beliefs. These themes were: EFL teacher's beliefs about the importance of teaching moral values; their beliefs about the difficulty of teaching moral values and the possible difference between male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching moral values. Particularly, 90% of the participants believed that teaching moral values is a crucial aspect of EFL education because it helps build up students' good character, and foster students' positive attitudes toward learning. Through the integration of moral education in EFL teaching, students are able to recognize Vietnamese traditional moral values, and gain the love for the country, develop their responsibility for the society, understand and respect cultural diversity among countries in the world. This finding was in line with Syafitri and Nurjamin (2021) in the sense that EFL teachers have positive attitudes toward teaching moral values in EFL classes and teaching moral values in EFL lessons may have a

positive impact on students' character development and learning achievement.

In addition, the findings also pointed out that more than 85% acknowledged their responsibility as EFL teachers to address moral values and integrate them into EFL lessons. Nineteen out of 21 teachers knew that the goals of the current national education curriculum are to help students develop moral qualities such as patriotism, compassion, diligence, honesty and responsibility. However, 35% of the teachers expressed that the moral values incorporated in their EFL teaching are not relevant to the ones presented in the curriculum. This inconsistency may be the result of their perceived control over teaching moral values in the contexts. This finding was partly similar to Divéki (2018) in which the factor related to students' interests may affect the teachers' implementation of teaching moral values.

4.2. Affective states

In this dimension, the findings showed the participant's positive feelings about teaching moral values. 70% of the teachers felt that students' attitudes and behaviors have positively changed thanks to teaching moral values in the classes. Besides, 16 out of 21 teachers expressed that integrating moral values into English language teaching helps improve students' English learning performance. This finding supported the one pertaining to the teachers' cognitive beliefs because the teachers believed that moral values could be integrated in EFL lessons, and it is EFL teachers who take responsibility for infusing moral values into the lessons. Accordingly, it seems that their positive feelings were interrelated to their high level of awareness.

4.3. Perceived control

The finding showed the participants' suggestions for using different strategies to teach students moral values in EFL classes. Twenty out of 21 teachers suggested incorporating moral values into EFL lessons, which means that moral values can be implicitly or explicitly taught. Meanwhile, 47% of the teachers indicated that there is a need to set goals for moral education in each lesson. In addition, nearly 62% of teachers agreed that EFL teachers should be moral exemplars for students to follow while 6 out of 21 believed that the activities in EFL lessons

embedded moral values should help foster students' critical thinking. Five out of 21 teachers thought that it is essential to make use of texts or literature focusing on moral values in EFL classes. This was consistent with Syafitri and Nurjamin's (2021) and Nova's (2017) findings in the sense that moral values can be incorporated into every learning activity in EFL classes in implicit or explicit modes.

On the other hand, the finding also revealed that approximately 81% of the teachers encountered difficulties when infusing moral values in EFL lessons due to both internal and external factors. Particularly, the participants expressed that they had little experience in teaching moral values. For instance, some of the teachers find it difficult to manage time in an EFL lesson where they have to teach students both language skills and moral values [teachers 8, 10, 13, 17, 18, 21] and some stated it is not easy to be moral exemplars [teachers 12, 13]. Moreover, one pointed out that she has limited knowledge of moral values from other countries to teach [teacher 1]. On the other hand, one teacher expressed EFL teacher needs to be skillfully incorporate moral values into the lesson. For external factors, some of the teachers indicated students' little effort to learn [teachers 2, 5, 7, 19, 20]. In this regard, the finding pointed out that 42% of the teachers perceived that the moral values they teach may be irrelevant to students'. It can be inferred that students' different home cultural backgrounds may be an external factor that influences their enthusiasm for learning. This finding was relevant to Nova's (2017) findings in terms of teachers' perceived difficulties in teaching moral values. The influential factors primarily came from teachers and students.

Taken together, the findings indicated that EFL teachers had positive attitudes toward integrating moral values into lessons. The teachers can employ many different strategies to implement that, such as making use of the reading texts, creating the activities that stimulate students' critical thinking about common moral issues, or being moral exemplars. Nevertheless, they can also face challenges when incorporating moral values due to learners' little motivation to learn and the level of teachers' perceived control of the difficulties. Based on the findings, some pedagogical recommendations were made.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

In this study, the Vietnamese EFL high school teachers showed their positive attitudes toward teaching moral values. Nonetheless, they also faced challenges in the implementation of teaching moral values in EFL classes. Accordingly, this study helps the readers, especially EFL language teachers, gain more awareness of incorporating moral values into their lessons in response to the goals of the 2018 general education curriculum regarding teaching moral values at the high school level. Therefore, from the participants' suggestions, teachers in EFL education at this level need to consider two factors during the incorporation of moral values into the lessons:

First, they need to know that EFL learners are future global citizens, so teaching language itself is not enough. Teachers need to consider the moral qualities while teaching English language in order to help them build up good character and become well-rounded persons. Besides, EFL teachers need to obtain more knowledge and skills in teaching moral values in EFL lessons. There should be a community for EFL teachers to share and learn from one another regarding teaching moral values so that the difficulties or challenges relating to classroom practice may be discussed and solved. In addition, EFL teachers should be role models who possess moral values and behave morally because students can also learn moral values through teachers' behavior.

Second, students have different cultural backgrounds, so it would be good if teachers could create a friendly learning environment where students can share their perceptions and attitudes toward the moral values they have learned. In that case, EFL teachers can adjust their teaching to meet students' expectations and the goals of the lessons.

Crucially, there should be further research in this scope with more participants and using multiple instruments to gain deeper insights into Vietnamese EFL teachers' attitudes toward teaching moral values in high school contexts. In doing so, pedagogical implications can be drawn; practical solutions to the problems can be found, and the goals of the current general educational curriculum can be fruitfully achieved.

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