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## An Activity Theoretic Exploration of the Causes of Language Learners' Misbehavior: Teachers' Belief in Focus

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### Abstract

This study attempts to explore the teachers' beliefs on the causes of learners' misbehavior in language classrooms. To do so, 23 language teachers completed a narrative frame in which they discussed a misbehavior experience they had in the class and why they thought it happened; they, then, attended semi-structured interviews where they discussed their experiences regarding learners' misbehavior. A thematic analysis was employed and the data was analyzed with an eye on the study's theoretical underpinning, i.e., Activity Theory (AT). The results indicated that there are different sources of misbehavior on different interconnected components of AT. In the "tool" component, the emergent themes were materials constraints, technological challenges, and hobbies interventions. In the "rules", some themes such as teaching methodology, socio-cultural norms, and political, and ideological intolerance or disobedience emerged. It was in the "community" component of AT that the data revealed social phenomena, colleagues and authorities, and learners heterogeneity. Finally, in the "division of labor" the emerged themes were overwhelming responsibilities, family issues, and executives' dereliction. The findings suggest a new look at language learners' misbehavior and inform teacher education programs in which teachers are trained on this issue to manage learning in their classrooms effectively.

**Keywords:** *Teacher Belief, Activity Theory, Language Learners' Misbehavior*

### Introduction

Classroom management emerges as a pivotal concern within the education field, particularly assuming heightened significance within language classrooms owing to the intricate nature of language acquisition processes (Curran, 2003; Todorova & Ivanova, 2020). Effective classroom management is believed to be critical for creating a positive learning environment, maximizing language learners' engagement and achievement, and promoting positive behavior

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(Afalla & Fabelico, 2020; Burden, 2020; Collier-Meek et al., 2019; Egeberg et al., 2021). Despite the importance of classroom management, many language instructors continue to struggle with this aspect of teaching due to factors such as large class sizes, diverse student populations, and limited resources. One of these prevalent factors is language learners' misbehavior or disruptive behavior (Gokalp & Can, 2022).

Misbehavior in language classes is a multifaceted phenomenon that can take various forms. Some teachers in different research observed and reported different types of common misbehavior in language classes such as disruptive talking (Dewi et al., 2023), inattention (Solhi, 2021), off-task Behavior (Gobel, 2008), and absenteeism and tardiness (Khasinah, 2017; Solhi, 2021; Yang & Moskovsky, 2021). Understanding these misbehaviors and how to manage them in language classes is crucial for creating a conducive learning environment.

Some researchers have suggested that one of the potential causes of misbehavior in language classes is a language barrier; some students struggle to understand language instruction, so they feel frustrated and disengaged (Sarkunan et al., 2021). Another cause of misbehavior in language classes might be cultural backgrounds, which results in misunderstandings about acceptable classroom behavior (Zhou & Li, 2015; Dewi et al., 2023). Some scholars reported that some students might have undiagnosed learning difficulties that make language acquisition challenging and lead to frustration (Ouidani et al., 2022). Also, misbehaving can be attributed to a lack of motivation, as students may become disengaged and disruptive if they need to see the relevance and value of learning English (Khasinah, 2017). Finally, students' psychological factors, such as family issues, anxiety, and low self-esteem, can manifest as misbehavior in language classes (Debreli & Ishanova, 2019; Yang & Moskovsky, 2021).

Understanding the causes of learners' misbehavior is crucial for effective classroom management and improving learning outcomes (Johnson et al., 2019). Despite the importance of this issue, there remains a paucity of studies regarding the causes of language learners' misbehavior from the viewpoint of language teachers, adopting an activity theoretic perspective in the context of Iran. The rationale behind this is that how teachers perceive misbehavior might show their attention to student's needs and how these needs can be addressed. In this study, the researchers focus on the context and the interplay between different elements of the classroom environment, including the teacher, language learners, and instructional activities. By examining the underlying factors that contribute to language learners' misbehavior, this study tries to provide insights into effective strategies for preventing and addressing this issue in language classrooms. Drawing on the Activity Theory model (Engeström, 1987), the present study explores teachers' perception of the causes of language learners' misbehavior in the complex environment of the educational milieu, i.e. language classroom.

## **Literature Review**

Classroom management is a crucial aspect of teaching, as it can impact student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall classroom dynamics. Doyle (1986) argues that "classroom management is certainly concerned with behavior, but it can also be defined more broadly as involving the planning, organization, and control of learners, the learning process and the classroom environment to create and maintain an effective learning experience" (p. 14).

Sowell (2013) classified classroom management into behavioral and instructional in a comprehensive study. He highlighted that instructional management refers to factors related to the teacher's ability to educate students using certain teaching materials. In contrast, behavioral management refers to the teacher's expectations of students' behavior, such as proper behavior, their level of interaction in the classroom (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2023), and several other factors such as scaffolding (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020). In line with previous studies, we consider both teachers' instructional and behavioral management in response to students' misbehavior in the teaching and learning process. Previous research agrees that students actively engaged in relevant tasks in class tend not to misbehave (Jones, 2020). However, one of the critical aspects of classroom management is to cope with student misbehavior and establish classroom discipline (Johnson et al., 2019).

### *Classification of Language Learners' Misbehavior*

Several recent studies investigated contributory factors to classroom management problems in primary and secondary levels of mainstream education. They reported that underlying causes of misbehavior among learners are overly crowded classrooms, cultural differences, time limitations, lack of student motivation, students with family or personal problems, and low self-esteem (Johnson et al., 2019; Zhou & Li, 2015). These sources of problems frequently manifest in coming late to class, using mobile phones, chatting, making non-verbal noises, and lack of active participation, which are regarded as forms of classroom misbehavior. These types of misbehaviors are observable in all education levels, except for utilizing mobile phones, as primary students are not allowed to carry them at school.

Charles (2007, pp.19–20) categorized types of classroom misbehavior as:

- Inattentiveness: not giving attention to the lesson and the teacher
- Obtuseness: unwilling to try to understand and participate in class discussions and tasks
- Talkativeness: During a lesson, chatting about topics unrelated to the topic of the lesson
- Moving around the class: Unable to sit and move around
- Annoying others: making noise, disturbing others
- Disruption: having confrontations with others, talking and laughing improperly, and shouting out during lessons
- Lying and stealing: telling a lie and taking other students' belongings without permission
- Cheating:
- Cheating: behave dishonestly or deceive someone to get what they want
- Sexual harassment: for instance, petting (touching, kissing) during the lesson.
- Aggression and fighting: threatening, pinching, hitting, wrestling, bullying, and shoving others
- Malicious mischief (mischievous): Destructing the school's furniture
- Defiance of authority: acting in disobedience, not carrying out a teacher's order, and replying to a teacher aggressively.

In the current literature, some techniques have been suggested to minimize behavioral problems in the classroom, for instance, monitoring students and giving clear instructions, engaging students by giving them responsibilities (Sarkunan et al., 2021; Wink et al., 2021), clearly explaining the rules and consequences of breaking them, and engaging students in different activities (Salarvand et al., 2023; Slater & Main, 2020). In addition to these, Egeberg et al., (2016) emphasized that effective strategies such as establishing routines, planning lessons effectively, arranging classroom seating, following classroom rules and norms, changing the pace of the lesson, and dealing with off-task students could reduce the instances of misbehavior in the classroom.

Most studies mentioned above in the existing literature have predominantly investigated students' misbehavior in mainstream education. Only a limited number of studies have been conducted to identify the causes of language learners' misbehavior from the standpoint of EFL teachers. In what follows, the focus of the remainder of the literature is to synthesize the literature on causes of misbehavior in EFL classes from teachers' perspectives.

#### *Past Studies on EFL Language Learners' Misbehavior*

The field of EFL Classroom management has been relatively unexplored in the literature (Debreli & Ishanova, 2019) making the present study a unique and valuable contribution. While there are abundant findings on students' misbehavior in general education (Ateh & Ryan, 2023; Johnson et al., 2019; Salarvand et al., 2023; Slater & Main, 2020), these have often been applied without question to EFL contexts. However, we argue that classroom management in general education and EFL classes are fundamentally different (Debreli & Ishanova, 2019). Our research addresses the main causes of EFL learners' misbehavior from teachers' perspectives, providing a fresh and insightful perspective.

In the context of Turkey, Öztürk (2017) conducted a study to find out how pre-and in-service EFL teachers perceive students' misbehavior and its reasons by employing semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed using in-depth content analysis. Teachers reported different types of misbehavior, such as talking in class, lack of participation, and lack of respect for the teacher. Regarding the root cause of misbehavior, pre-service teachers reported that families and teachers are changing the norms of society. In contrast, the in-service teachers mainly attributed misbehavior to students' capacity, demotivation, families, and school-related problems and did not mention 'teachers' as a cause for students' misbehaviors. He also found that pre-service teachers mostly repeated the theme of 'respect'. Debreli and Ishanova (2019) investigated different types of misbehaviors and strategies adopted by teachers to manage EFL classrooms in the context of three preparatory English courses in Cyprus.

Both Benaissi (2021) and El Ouidani and El Baghdadi (2022), in two different studies, investigated the type of misbehavior, its causes, and strategies to cope with this misbehavior in the EFL context of Morocco. The former research used a questionnaire to collect data from high school teachers. The findings revealed that family background, lack of parental follow-up with school, and social factors are the main causes of misbehavior. In the latter study, El Ouidani and El Baghdadi (2022) employed 69 EFL high school teachers and 240 students to respond to questionnaires and conducted semi-structured interviews with five teachers and students. They also found that the leading causes of student misbehavior are negative attitudes toward school, family problems, and teachers' behavior.

Similarly, Srirezky and Sahril (2023) investigated students' disruptive behavior in EFL classes and factors that contribute to it at secondary schools in Indonesia. 10th-grade students were observed and interviewed. The researchers frequently observed different types of disruptive behavior among EFL learners, namely cheating, excessive use of phones, inattention, moving around the room, apathy, needless talk, annoying others, and disrupting by making loud noises. The frequent themes that emerged from interviews regarding the main causes of disruptive behavior were lack of interest in English, physical discomfort, individual problems, and peer pressure.

Despite the importance of classroom management, there is a lack of research on this topic from the Iranian language teachers' perspective. Therefore, this study investigates the factors that Iranian language teachers believe contribute to student misbehavior in their classrooms. This research is significant because identifying these factors can help teachers better understand and manage EFL learners' behavior, leading to a more positive and productive learning environment for all involved. By shedding light on the perspectives of Iranian language teachers, this study can contribute to developing effective strategies for addressing the issue of EFL learners' misbehavior in Iranian classrooms. Therefore, the research questions for this study are proposed as follows:

**RQ1:** What are Iranian language teachers' beliefs about the causes of EFL learners' misbehavior?

**RQ2:** How does the AT framework explain this?

### **Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory**

Activity theory (henceforth AT) is a theoretical framework that has gained considerable attention in various fields, including psychology, education, and sociology. Introduced by Vygotsky (1978) AT posits that human behavior is driven by the pursuit of specific goals within a given social and cultural context. The theory emphasizes the interplay between individual agency and the broader social and cultural factors that shape human behavior. According to AT, human activity is not isolated but instead is situated within a larger system of activity that includes tools, rules, division of labor, and social relations among individuals. This approach provides a useful framework for understanding complex phenomena such as learning, work, and innovation.

AT has several models that can be used to analyze and understand human activity. One such model is the subject-object dialectic (Bhaskar, 2013), which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the individual and the object or task they are trying to accomplish. According to this model, the individual's activity is shaped by their goals and intentions, as well as by the constraints and affordances of the object or task. The theory has been applied to a wide range of domains, including education, healthcare, organizational management, and education. By emphasizing the social and cultural context of human behavior, activity theory offers a more holistic and nuanced approach to understanding and improving human activity.

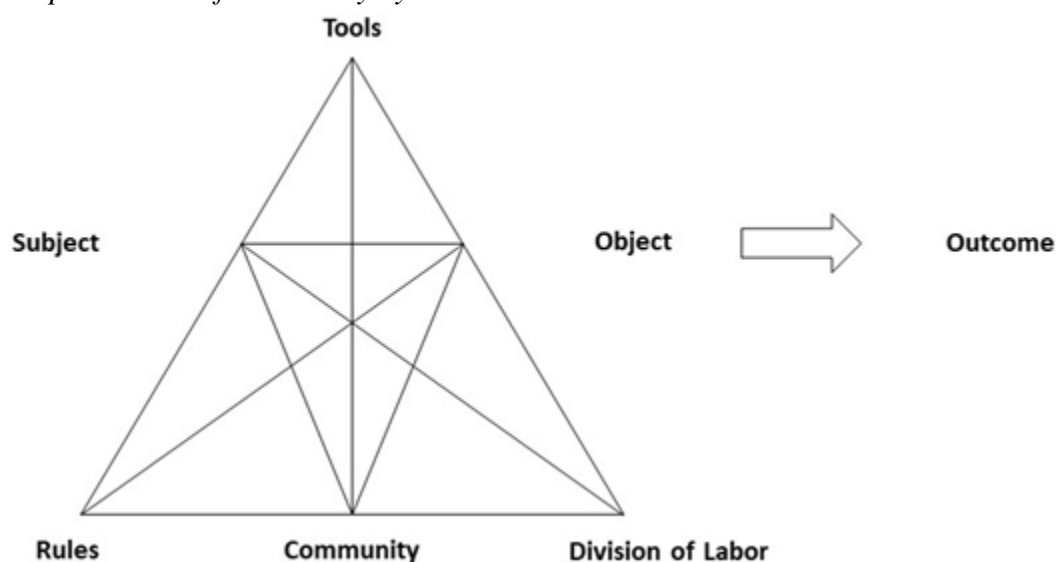
There are different studies adopting the activity theory model to analyze different aspects of language classrooms (Antoniadou, 2011; Chong et al., 2022; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022); however, employing AT as a framework to investigate the causes of students' misbehavior from teachers' perspectives is an under-researched area. According to the main principle of AT, since humans generally collaborate with others in their work, their actions

should be studied as a group effort. Therefore, this study considers language teachers, their work environment, and the people involved in it as a complete entity to better understand their perception of students' misbehavior.

The AT model informed this study is the one proposed by Engeström (1987) in which five components are interconnected including subject, object, tools, community, rules, and division of labor. The term “subject” refers to the people or groups participating in an activity and how they perceive it; “object” is the end goal that the subjects aim to achieve; “tools” are the methods or resources that subjects use to accomplish their objectives; “rules” are the set of explicit or implicit standards and regulations that could either facilitate or obstruct performance; “community” refers to the group or institution that the subjects are part of while participating in the activity; and “division of labor” involves the collaborative duties of the community members, including their respective roles and power dynamics (see figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Complex Model of an Activity System*



*Note. From Engeström, 2015, p. 203*

Using AT as a theoretical framework is significant on the ground that it provides a comprehensive lens to examine the multifaceted and dynamic nature of language classroom interactions and misbehavior. AT allows the researchers to consider not just individual actions but also the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts influencing behavior. By focusing on interconnected layers such as rules, tools, community, and division of labor, the present study tries to uncover how these elements collectively contribute to language learners' misbehavior. This holistic approach enables a deeper understanding of the systemic issues and interdependencies that shape teachers' beliefs and learners' actions, thus offering insights that can inform more effective strategies in teacher education programs.

## Method

### *Context and Participants*

English language education in Iran, the context from which the participants are selected, exists in two different forms, one of which is state schools' context in which English is a mandatory

subject from elementary to high school levels (it also continues at the tertiary level by integrating general English and ESP (English For Specific Purpose) in the curriculum) and the other is private institutes. This EFL context, regardless of its forms (state or private), presents both challenges and opportunities for language educators due to several factors, inter alia, large class sizes, students' varying levels of proficiency, and the students' ideological, social, and cultural differences (Soleimani & Razmjoo, 2016; Khazaei et al., 2012).

The participants of this study were selected from both sectors (state and private) and from different cities in Iran to be the representative of the population of Iranian teachers. The present study adopted snowball sampling for selecting its participants by the first researcher sharing the Google form link of narrative frames in his social media and asking the teachers to share it with other teachers. In one week, 23 teachers wrote their narrative frames. Although they all were Iranian, they were selected nationwide; they came from different parts of Iran e.g., Tehran, Karaj, Mashad, Shiraz, etc. Their mother tongue was Farsi and they learned English as a foreign language in Iran. They all were teachers with the experience of teaching English as a Foreign Language from 1 to 24 years and they aged between 21 and 45 (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of the Participating Teachers*

Teacher No.	Gender	Age	Working context	Education	Teaching Exp.
1.	Female	42	Yazd	MA TEFL	7
2.	Female	45	Tehran	MA TEFL	24
3.	Male	43	Tehran	PhD TEFL	24
4.	Male	34	Tabriz	BA Translation	2
5.	Female	28	Tehran	BA Eng. Literature	10
6.	Female	35	Hamedan	MA Candidate (TEFL)	10
7.	Female	35	Dezful	BA Eng. Literature	8
8.	Male	30	Urmia	BA Eng. Literature	10
9.	Female	30	Tehran	MA TEFL	10
10.	Female	28	Zanjan	MA Candidate (TEFL)	8
11.	Female	38	Karaj	MA TEFL	20
12.	Female	36	Tehran	BA Eng. Translation	10
13.	Female	36	Shiraz	MA TEFL	12
14.	Male	39	Tehran	MA TEFL	16
15.	Female	40	Kerman	PhD Candidate (TEFL)	17
16.	Female	21	Tehran	BA Eng. Translation	1
17.	Female	38	Mashad	MA TEFL	14
18.	Male	38	Babol	MA TEFL	20
19.	Female	40	Tehran	MA TEFL	14
20.	Male	42	Ahvaz	PhD Candidate (TEFL)	10
21.	Female	42	Tehran	PhD TEFL	20
22.	Female	24	Garmsar	MA TEFL	6
23.	Female	44	Tehran	PhD TEFL	17

#### *Data Collection*

Based on the AT model (Galperin, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978), as an underpinning theory of the present study, an exploratory qualitative approach was utilized to investigate the teachers' perspectives about the students' misbehavior in language classrooms. To gather the data, through snowball sampling, a narrative frame was sent to a number of teachers. The teachers were asked to complete three sentences (1. One of the most challenging moments for me in which I experienced students' misbehavior was when ... 2. This experience was really

memorable for me because ... 3. The reason behind this misbehavior was probably ...) through a Google form link and requested to share it with other teachers. Out of them, 23 replies were received from teachers of different ages and teaching experiences. Then, all participating teachers attended semi-structured interviews (lasting from 30 to 45 minutes). All teachers who agreed to participate in the study were informed about the ethical considerations and were assured that their identities and information would be kept confidential. The study's aims and procedures were also explained and approved by them.

### *Data Analysis*

The study's theoretical framework is based on the AT model, which informed the narrative frames and analysis of data obtained from them and their follow-up interviews. The study mainly used deductive thematic analysis, where data was pre-coded based on a predetermined framework (i.e., AT); however, it also employed some inductive thematic analysis to include data that did not fit into the predetermined framework. The researchers acknowledged that their positionality might influence the data analysis process; therefore, they tried to interpret the data with caution. The researchers have been engaged in various projects outside of Iran for several years leading up to this study. However, their extensive experience collaborating with Iranian teachers in diverse roles—such as teacher, teacher educator, Director of Studies, and researcher—over the preceding years has provided them with a profound understanding of the context and the individuals who took part in the study. The data from narrative frames and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis principles. The data were transcribed, codified, and analyzed to identify codes related to students' misbehavior and its causes according to the AT model. The codes were grouped into potential themes, which were then defined and named by the researchers. For example, “different levels of students”, “dominant students” and “know-all students” were grouped under the “learners” theme in the AT model. The researchers shared and discussed the thematic map to check and apply any possible change and they agreed with the emerging themes. The final thematic map identified the causes of students' misbehavior from teachers' perspectives based on the AT model in language classrooms.

### **Findings**

After running the thematic analysis on the gathered data, the following result was revealed. The results will be discussed from the activity theory perspective (Engeström, 1987) whose components will be discussed in turn.

### *Subject and Object*

Based on the AT model, the term "subjects" pertains to the people or groups who are part of a particular activity, as viewed from the standpoint of how the activity is conceived (Engeström, 1987). In this study, the subject is the participating teachers who share their perspectives about the analyzed activity, i.e. students' misbehavior.

The object, on the other hand, refers to the end objective that the subject is striving to achieve (Engeström, 1987). In the present study, three themes emerged from the data including “controlling the classroom's awkward moments”, “coping with students' differences causing misbehavior”, and “not being penalized for the students' misbehavior by authorities”.



T7, in her narrative, pointed out that her ultimate goal was to be able to solve her problem with her students who wanted to challenge her in the very moment of misbehavior. To do so, she prepared herself before going to the class and anticipated some possible questions they would ask. “My solution was to analyze the target language and think deeply about anticipated problems to avoid confrontations in the class” (T7, Narrative). As it eludes, controlling the awkward moment of confrontation was the teacher’s ultimate goal of thinking deeply and anticipating the possible problems that might occur in the class.

Students even in the most homogeneous classes come from different political, cultural, social, and ideological backgrounds, which need an expert to understand, respect, and consider these differences to avoid any misbehavior in the class. T4 puts it this way “The teacher should be an expert in psychology and sociology to understand students’ differences. If he or she doesn’t, students start misbehaving because they think they are disrespected. It is what I learned from my own experience” (T4, interview). As the data shows, the teacher argued that it was ignoring the students’ background which could indirectly cause some of their misbehavior because they considered it a disrespect.

The last theme that emerged from the data in the object category of the AT model was to avoid being penalized by authority which was argued by T8 as follows: “That was such an amazingly memorable event because that ended up in a window smash and I got penalized for not being able to manage the situation. I never let it happen again” (T8, Interview). The teacher was penalized and this was the reason for the activity to be remembered. She expressed at the end that she would never permit such an event which showed how she set a goal for herself.

### *Tools*

The tools in the AT model refer to aids that the subject (teachers in this study) exploits to reach its goal. The themes that emerged from the data in this category were materials (e.g., curriculum, exams, and coursebooks), technological challenges, and hobbies interventions.

School systems and curricula could be causes of students’ misbehavior. This is what T16 pointed out in her narrative. She held a view that because the curriculum was strict and did not leave any room for fun, it became tedious and motivates misbehavior. She stated, “I think the only reason for such misbehavior is that the students have negative feelings regarding the school system and they don't care about the curriculum” (T16, Narrative). It demonstrated how the teacher thought that curriculum could cause students misbehavior by injecting negative feelings in the students.

T14 raised a point about test anxiety and asserted that the exams could be a reason that made students stressed and this might cause some misbehavior.

*The reason for this misbehavior was probably that ... they were sick and tired of too much pressure from school for having too many exams for all school subjects. It was a tantrum they threw only because they felt under too much pressure and it was an unwanted misbehavior (T14, Interview).*

As the extract clearly demonstrated, exams might cause students’ misbehavior such as aggressiveness, temper tantrums, and rebellion due to their anxiety-provoking nature.

T2 pointed out that coursebooks did not leave any room for teachers' creativity; it bored students and bored students begin to misbehave.

*None of the students attended the class ... The reason behind their behavior would be that the content of the book was not interesting and the methodology didn't give me enough room to do activities appropriate for them and engage learners (T2, Interview).*

As the extract illustrated, the teacher believed that this was a coursebook that imposed some restrictions on her creativity which caused the class to become boring and it, eventually, led students to misbehave.

Technology has gained a lot of attention from scholars in recent years and is encouraged to be used extensively in the classroom. The universities have already started majors such as educational technology to facilitate the process. However, this can also have downsides, as well. T21 put it this way:

*I believe technology is a problem as well. I do my best to teach well and I am always prepared but I'm not good with technology. I mostly have problems with using smartboards or playing audio on them and you know ... something like this. It becomes worse when it comes to online classes. Webcam, microphone, breakout rooms, ... oh God ... there are a lot of things I have to take care of. And sometimes because it takes a long time for me to solve my issues with technology my students start mocking me (T21, Interview).*

The teacher complained about the technology and how it caused students to disrespect or belittle her. This can be worse with teachers who are technophobes or are not familiar with new technological tools.

The last emerging theme in the tools category belongs to hobbies. T10 argued that a football match in one of her classes caused a severe misbehavior case.

*It was about three years ago. I had a class with some boys who were so naughty and really into football. There was a game between two famous Iranian teams ... and the boys wanted to watch the game but they had a session with me ... I saw that they had their earbuds on. I respectfully asked them to turn the buds off, but one of them started shouting and nagging out of anger. I got so confused and upset ... (T10, Interview)*

It is clear from the extract that the cause of shouting at the teacher was the students' hobby (the football match) that the student obsessively loved. Depriving the students of doing what they excessively loved, caused a severe case of misbehavior.

### *Rules*

The second category in activity theory that this study explored its emerged themes from the teachers' perspective was the category of rules. The findings suggested three themes in this category including "teaching methodology", "sociocultural norms", and "political and ideological intolerance or disobedience".

Twelve teachers stated that the methodology refrained them from using creative, fun, and engaging activities and it caused the students to become bored, and bored students were prone to misbehave. T11 expressed, “The reason behind their behavior would be that ... the methodology didn't give me enough room to do activities appropriate for them and engage learners” (T11, Narrative). The teacher explicitly used the word methodology in this extract and believed this was the reason for some students’ misbehaviors.

Socio-cultural, political, and ideological norms are always the source of misunderstanding or misconceptions if not met by others. T3 asserted that not observing Muslim rules during Ramadan month caused a misbehavior incident in his class. He mentioned a cause for this misbehavior (in his and other students’ opinion) as follows:

*... a student of mine ... didn't take into consideration the cultural and religious standards/ principles of Ramadan in the class. While some students in the class were fasting, she entered the class with her coffee cup. The aroma of coffee soon spread in the class which made most of the students as well as me shocked because in Iran people are not allowed to eat or drink in public during Ramadan ... The reason for this misbehavior was probably her hatred of some beliefs (T3, Interview).*

As it is clear from the extract, the teacher believed violating a social norm is misbehavior and explained that disobedience of the rules, which was a dominant norm of the society, was the cause of this misbehavior.

### *Community*

Human is a social animal and cannot live outside of society; therefore, societal elements play important roles in his/her aspects of life. In this category of the AT model, three themes emerged from the data, namely “social phenomenon”, “colleagues and authorities”, and “learners”.

A social phenomenon is any observable fact or event that occurs within a society or a social group that encompasses all aspects of human behavior, including social relationships, cultural beliefs, and societal norms. Social phenomena can be studied in various fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, and political science. Some examples of social phenomena include prejudice, groupthink, social stratification, gender roles, globalization, and divorce (Thompson et al., 2016). Understanding social phenomena is crucial for creating positive social change and addressing issues such as inequality, discrimination, and social injustice.

One of the issues opposite-sex teachers experience in segregated classrooms is being teased or harassed by the students. T9 in explaining her situation in one of her classes described her experience teaching in one of these classes as an annoying one.

*I was teaching to a group of teenagers who were really naughty. They were all boys. They wanted to realize what was going on in my personal life and they made some difficulties for me by chasing me and making some disturbances (T9, Interview).*

The opposite-sex issues are more severe in societies that emphasize the segregation of classes and limit opposite-sex relationships.

It is not hard to assume learners as the main source of our teaching community's misbehavior. Their individual differences, various ideological, social, and cultural backgrounds, and a number of other variables make this part of the community an important player in their own misbehavior.

*... one of the young learners wanted to talk more than the others. His speaking level was a little higher than the others. When I asked the other students, he answered without permission ... I couldn't stop him from speaking. I was afraid of demotivating him (T8, Interview).*

This extract can be looked upon from different perspectives. For example, it can be discussed through the introvert/extrovert dimension arguing that this happened because the dominant student was more sociable. It can also be analyzed based on other individual difference concepts such as dominance, willingness to communicate (WTC), and the like. Whatever it is, it showed how learners' various variables affected their behavior.

Colleagues and authorities, as a part of the community, can be also a source of students' misbehavior. Their behavior with the students, their expectations from them, and their reaction to their misbehavior among other variables can teach students (directly and indirectly) how to behave in other classes.

*One of the most challenging moments for me in which I experienced students' misbehavior was when students filled out a form about requesting their next term teacher; however, the school didn't accept it and I became their teacher ... some students ... refused to obey normal and natural conditions and complained about any tasks I had assigned (T5, Narrative).*

The extract clarified that wanting another colleague of hers by the student directly led the learners to be rebellious and show misbehavior. It is noteworthy that if the school manager could agree with the students, misbehavior would be diminished. This put another theme of this category into the spotlight, i.e. authorities.

#### *Division of Labor*

The category under which one theme has emerged was the division of labor which involved assigning tasks to members of a community, taking into account their roles and the power dynamics between them (Engeström, 1987). The themes emerged here are “high responsibility of the teachers”, “Family issues” and “executives” especially in low-income countries in which teachers should work long hours to be able to manage their lives.

*I think the reason for this misbehavior was me. Because I didn't have enough time to analyze my students, I didn't know she was sensitive about her height and I made a joke about it and she was very angry and sad (T22, Narrative).*

The extract illuminated how important it could be to have enough time to consider different aspects of our profession such as planning, needs analysis, and to metamorphose into an expert teacher (Kamali, 2021). One of the teachers considered a parental divorce, a source of a student's misbehavior expressing that "... Usually, these kinds of problems come from another hard situation in their own family. About Hila, it was her parents' divorce which made her not to be easy" (T11, Narrative). It showed the teacher thought that the student's misbehavior rooted in a family issue i.e., the parents' divorce. The teacher thought that it is the effect of this event that made her students more sensitive.

Family's influence on the students (particularly young learners) was traceable in their misbehavior.

*... when I asked him why he didn't study for the exam and it made me disappointed because he answered rudely " I didn't spend 500 million Rials to come to this school for studying!!!" I suppose it came from family and he was repeating the parents' words (T1, Interview).*

As the data demonstrated, the teacher believed that the student was repeating his family's words, and the arrogant view she held was rooted in her family's viewpoint.

Another subtheme that emerged from data in the division of labor theme was the impact of executives such as managers, supervisors, and the like on students' misbehavior. T18 explained it in the form of a story that happened to her in one of the language schools he worked for.

*We had a supervisor ... Whenever the students didn't like a teacher, they told her that the teacher did wrong things in the class ... and the supervisor without any further discussion with the teacher, changed the teacher of the class. This caused a lot of problems for us ... for example, I can remember one of the students was late and when I asked her to be on time next time she said she would ask the supervisor to change me (T18, Interview).*

Executives of the system teachers work at can be the causes of misbehavior by their own behavior with students and teachers. In fact, part of the students' misbehavior has to do with the other stakeholders' failure to fulfill their duties properly.

Overall, Examining the findings through the lens of activity theory, the study explored AT's components of subject and object, tools, rules, community, and division of labor. The identified themes provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the classroom environment. This dynamic interrelationship among the components of the AT, as illuminated by the thematic analysis, highlighted the dynamic and interconnected nature of subjects' goals, the tools they employed, the rules governing their actions, the influence of the community, and the nuanced division of labor. They all converged to shape the complex phenomenon of teachers' belief in the causes of students' misbehavior within the educational milieu.

## Discussion

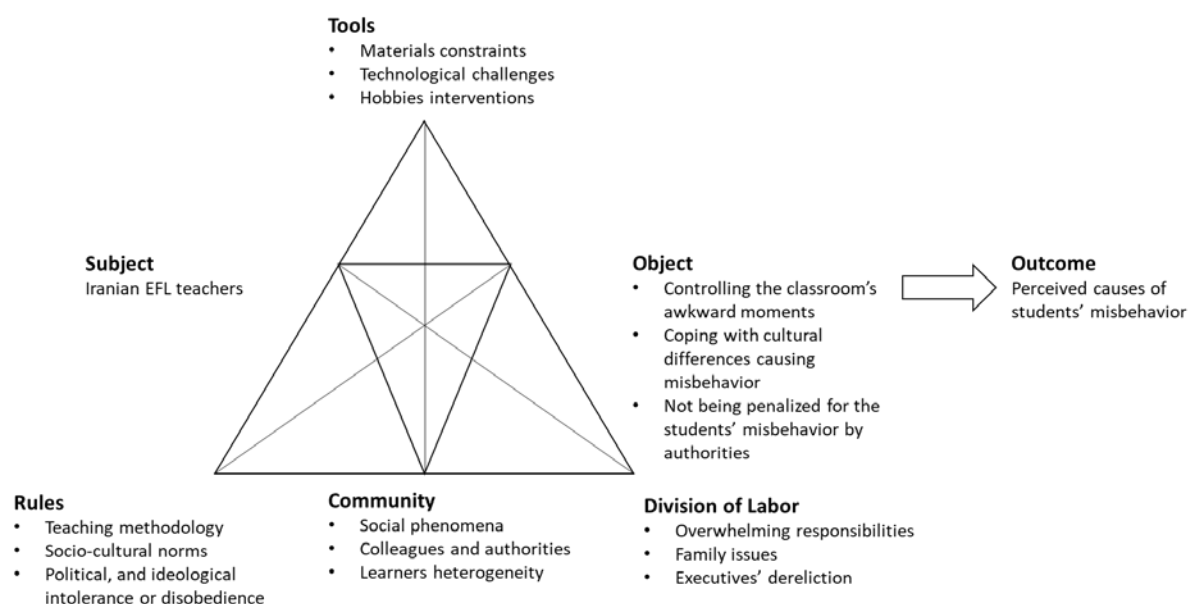
The results that emerged from the data revealed that the causes of learners' misbehavior in language classes are complex and occur as an interplay between individual agency and the

broader social and cultural factors that shape the behavior. The findings suggested that sources of language learners' misbehavior are not isolated but situated within a larger system of activity that includes tools, rules, division of labor, and communal relations among individuals (see figure 2).

Erdem and Kocyigit (2019) suggested that one of the causes of learners' misbehavior is in-class causes, one of which is curriculum/school system-related causes. In line with their findings, the present study revealed that curriculum as a source of fun-spoiler and disengagement can be a serious cause for students' misbehavior. In the same vein, Johnson et al. (2019), whose findings suggested nine discrete students' misbehavior antecedents in three categories including deficiency, belief, and external antecedents, considered personal issues such as hobbies and responsibilities as the distinctive causes of students' misbehavior. Exams are also considered to cause anxiety (Kamali, 2013) and this may lead to disruptive misbehavior. The present study corroborates the findings of Li et al. (2024) who concluded that students with less anxiety were more autonomous with lower level of misbehavior.

**Figure 2**

*Schematic Representation of an Activity Theoretic Perspective on the Teachers' Perceived Causes of Students' Misbehavior in the Language Classrooms*



*Figure 2 Alt Text: a triangular shape showing different aspects of activity theory emerged from this study.*

Intercultural communications have the potential of misunderstandings (Kaur, 2011). This aligns with the findings of this study where sociocultural norms can cause misunderstandings which may lead to misbehavior. In line with Kamali (2024) which proves the ongoing significance of culture in the perception of the process of classroom management, the findings of the present study revealed that ideological, social, and cultural norms may inform the students' misbehavior. Gay (2013) also pointed out that the underlying causes of students' misbehavior might be situated in cultural conflicts which conforms to the findings of the present study that cultural norms along with other types of norms can impact the students'

behavior in the classroom especially when they are in contrast with the other members of the class or the content of teaching.

Community as the most significant factor in sociocultural concepts has been explored extensively in the literature (e.g., Chirkov, 2020; Lantolf, 2011; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). The present study, accordingly, found its dramatic impact on the learners' misbehavior. Social phenomena such as divorce, family, learners, other teachers, and executives have an evident influence on students' misbehavior (Ding et al., 2010; Rey & Johnson, 2023; Zulauf-McCurdy et al., 2024). In a recent study, Zulauf-McCurdy et al. (2024) argued that engaging families in dealing with learners' misbehavior is crucial. Ding et al. (2010), harmonious with this study, explored some of these reasons such as family, and suggested some coping strategies to deal with the related misbehavior. Rey and Johnson (2023) suggested that family and friends are among other factors that cause students-athletes to dissent. Their findings are in agreement with the findings of the current study in which the community has been found to be a source of misbehavior.

Teachers who are paid like factory workers in some low-income countries such as Iran (Akbari, 2008) should work long hours to be able to cope with their life expenses. Kamali (2014, 2021) argued these constraints as an obstacle to teacher development. The present study, aligning with these findings, suggested that teacher over-responsibilities can cause students' misbehavior in the sense that it can impact on teacher-student relationship and increase the distance between them which impacts teachers' understanding of students' needs, wants, and rights. In the same vein, Aloe et al. (2014) asserted that teacher burnout, as offspring of teacher high responsibilities, impacts students and can reinforce students' misbehavior.

The teachers participating in this study acknowledged that students' misbehavior had some impact on their jobs; therefore, they had to control them by ignoring, confronting and even taking some serious actions. Similar conclusions were drawn by Martin and Stephenson (1999) who suggested that students' misbehavior was negatively correlated with teachers' confidence and Chang (2013) and Tran (2016) who validated the relationships between the teachers' emotions and students' misbehavior. In a systematic review of 6,137 records, Aldrup et al. (2024) also found that teachers' negative emotions were associated with poorer classroom management with which this study goes hand in hand.

All in all, learners' misbehavior is a result of the interplay among different factors in which the classroom milieu is located. In sociocultural phenomenology where AT roots, an activity is viewed and analyzed in a system; not as some isolated entities. The findings of this study can add to the rich literature on AT and learners' misbehavior. It not only reiterated the significance of the AT model in education where social, communal, cultural, and ideological elements are interconnected but also furnish empirical support for its efficacy in addressing learners' misbehavior.

## **Conclusion**

The present study explored the complex nature of students' misbehavior in language classes through the lens of AT. The findings suggest that misbehavior is not an isolated occurrence but rather a result of the interplay between individual agency and broader factors that shape behavior. The study highlighted the significance of different factors such as educational tools, rules, and the community, in shaping language learners' misbehavior. The results further


underscored the importance of sociocultural phenomenology and the AT model in analyzing and understanding misbehavior in the classroom.


The implications of this study are multifaceted. The findings can inform teacher training programs and professional development initiatives, especially in low-income countries where teachers may face over-responsibilities and high levels of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). The study highlights the need for teachers to be trained in identifying and addressing the underlying causes of students' misbehavior, such as curriculum design, cultural conflicts, and community influences. Furthermore, the results of this study could have significant implications for teachers and teacher educators to inform classroom management strategies and emphasize the importance of creating a positive classroom environment that fosters respectful and positive interactions between teachers and students.

Future research could extend the study to different contexts with various sociocultural norms to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' misbehavior in language classes. They can also explore the impact of individual factors such as gender, age, and socio-economic background on students' misbehavior. Finally, future research can examine the impact of different classroom management strategies on students' misbehavior and the effectiveness of teacher training programs in addressing misbehavior in the classroom.

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