

A STUDY ON HOW STUDENTS' SOCIAL INTERACTION SKILLS ARE FOSTERED THROUGH INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES EMPLOYED BY EFL TEACHERS IN TERTIARY READING COMPREHENSION CLASSES

TÌM HIỂU CÁCH GIẢNG VIÊN TIẾNG ANH THÚC ĐẨY KỸ NĂNG
TƯƠNG TÁC XÃ HỘI TRONG LỚP ĐỌC HIỂU CHO SINH VIÊN HỆ ĐẠI HỌC
QUA CÁC HOẠT ĐỘNG TƯƠNG TÁC

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ABSTRACT: *Employing IAs in language classes enables the learners to develop their command of the English language as well as foster the effectiveness of English teaching and learning in a certain context. Thus, it is important and necessary to apply IAs in a classroom environment for its significance to both teachers and learners. This article investigates how teachers perceive and employ IAs in teaching EFL reading comprehension subjects in order to foster EFL tertiary students' social interaction skills. Three teachers were chosen to participate in this qualitative case study. A triangulation of research instruments including in-depth interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews were used for collecting data. Findings showed that teachers' perception and practice were not always the same. Emphasizing social collaborative working environment as a crucial element in making reading classes socially interactive, the selected teachers organized IAs in the form of pair work, group work, team work or even individuality interchangeably and flexibly. However, the findings also pointed out the mismatch between the teachers' perception and their practice relating to the issue under investigation to a certain extent.*

Key words: *Classroom interaction, social interaction, interactive activities, tertiary, reading comprehension*

TÓM TẮT: *Sử dụng hoạt động tương tác (HĐTT) trong các lớp học ngôn ngữ cho phép người học phát triển khả năng sử dụng tiếng Anh cũng như nâng cao hiệu quả của việc dạy và học tiếng Anh. Vì vậy, điều quan trọng và cần thiết là áp dụng HĐTT trong môi trường lớp học vì tầm quan trọng và sự cần thiết của HĐTT đối với cả người dạy và người học. Bài viết này điều tra cách giảng viên nhận thức và sử dụng HĐTT trong việc giảng dạy môn đọc hiểu tiếng Anh nhằm thúc đẩy kỹ năng tương tác xã hội của sinh viên hệ đại học. Ba giảng viên đã được chọn để tham gia vào nghiên cứu tình huống định tính này. Các công cụ nghiên cứu bao gồm phỏng vấn chuyên sâu, quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn kích thích hồi tưởng đã được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu. Kết quả cho thấy nhận thức và thực hành của giáo viên không phải lúc nào cũng giống nhau. Nhấn mạnh môi trường làm việc hợp tác xã hội như một yếu tố quan trọng trong việc làm cho các lớp học có tính tương tác xã hội, các giảng viên trong nghiên cứu đã tổ chức HĐTT dưới hình thức khác nhau một cách linh*

hoạt. Tuy nhiên, kết quả cũng chỉ ra sự không tương thích nhất định giữa nhận thức và thực hành của giảng viên đối với vấn đề được nghiên cứu.

Từ khóa: Tương tác lớp học, tương tác xã hội, hoạt động tương tác, hệ đại học, đọc hiểu.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the appearance of various teaching approaches, since the early 1970s when English was popularly taught as a core subject among different foreign languages in schools, the issue of classroom interaction has attracted the researchers' attention worldwide. Its main objective is to focus on the whole class interaction between teacher and students, since “through interaction, students can increase their language store, [...], and they can “use all they possess of the language [...] that they have learned or casually absorbed in real-life exchange” [3, p.165]. Since its appearance, classroom interaction has been put in priority in language settings at different levels of education because it not only provides collaborative contexts for language learning where learners can work with language, receive feedback, and modify their language but also construct language knowledge which peers (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Ohta, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2013).

Educational studies in the field of classroom interaction including interactive activities (IAs) in foreign language (FL) classes have provided realistic viewpoints about how IAs can be employed, and what benefits IAs bring to FL teaching and learning. Studies in the field show that using IAs in language classrooms often helps teachers create a successful and exciting environment for learning and allow teachers to tap into the range of “multiple intelligences” as described by

Howard Gardner (1983, cited in [13], p.74). It is also noticeable that IAs are seen as a productive teaching technique since they enable the learners to develop their command of the English language as well as foster the effectiveness of English teaching and learning in a certain context [18], [19]. These perspectives advocate the importance and necessity of using IAs in a classroom environment for its significance to both teachers and learners.

Reading, an important skill to be mastered in learning a language, is a core subject in the EFL students' learning program as it helps broaden their knowledge in other fields and supports the other basic skills of English. Furthermore, since it is considered a highly effective means of extending our command of language, reading is of importance in every language classroom, where language learning is the central purpose (Nutall, 1983, cited in [10]). Students' reading abilities largely depend on language teachers' instruction [10], and language teachers are encouraged to use collaborative reading techniques to facilitate students' reading skills [19]. It is no doubt that good reading skills surely help students succeed in their learning process at school and in their lives in general (Dechant, 1991, cited in [4], p.160); however, teaching EFL reading skills has not been an easy job for the fact that it requires teachers to use different teaching strategies and activities to not only reach all students' comprehension but make

them become active readers as well [10].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. A brief literature review

o Interaction in EFL contexts

Perspectives about classroom interaction based on sociocultural theory view learning as a process through which learners acquire knowledge from interactions with more knowledgeable peers and experts whose scaffoldings likely advance them to be more capable of performing tasks slightly beyond their current capacities in comparison with when they work individually. Vygotsky [17] emphasized the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffoldings as two main tenets that affect mental activities of a person in learning things through interacting with the more capable peers in the social environment. In the sense of ZPD, through collaborative working, learners can complete tasks more easily (Donato, 1994; Kos 2016; Watanabe, 2008). ZPD is, therefore, regarded as “the core element” of Vygotsky's theory as it “refers to a distinguishing point between students' performance when they are not guided or helped by other people” [16]. In other words, a person's learning in the ZPD is activated only when “interacting with people in his environment” [17, p.90], and the learner's performance when guided by teachers is better than the performance of those who do not receive any help and guidance. Thus, an understanding of human thinking and knowledge depends on an understanding of the social experience and the force of the cognitive process derives from social interactions.

Regarded as a key concept of

sociocultural theory regarding social interaction, scaffolding, together with ZPD, “places the social context at the heart of the learning and communication process” [6], where students can get benefits from social interactions “under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” [6, p.4]. By providing enough assistance to EFL learners, teachers can facilitate their students' learning ability, and gradually they can perform by themselves in similar situations as they were (Poorahmadi, 2009). The above viewpoints of scaffolding prove that this tenet can occur in collaborative form and accomplishment where both scaffolders and scaffoldees can exchange their roles and get mutual benefits from scaffolding activities (Donato, 1994). Since scaffolding is seen as an interactive process occurring between teacher and students who are required to participate actively in the teaching and learning process, the study follows the current trends of viewing scaffolding as an interactional process of teacher's assistance in the language learning environment through IAs.



Fig. 1 Interaction among Learners, Peers, and Teacher in an EFL Context [1, p.222]

It is indicated in Fig. 1 that in the scaffolding process, the problem-solving activity is aimed to justify the distinction between an individual learner's actual development level and his/her potential level. By collaborating with a more capable person such as a teacher and/or peer in problem-solving activity, the learners are expected to shorten the distance between their actual level of development and potential level. In EFL classrooms, learners can develop a framework or skeleton for their learning through social activity under the guidance of the teacher as an expert. A teacher who provides a supportive learning environment plays a central role in helping the learners become more involved in the performance of different language tasks. In this case, mutual interaction (peer scaffolding) between teacher and students

and among students would be promoted. This enhanced interactive relationship is supposed to motivate the learners' participation and collaboration, which may result in effective communication by employing a set of learning strategies [1].

Van de Pol et al. [16] classify scaffolding means into six categories to help complete learning activities: feedback, giving hints, instructing, explaining, modeling, and questioning. He also described or defined each technique as “the support given by a teacher to a student when performing a task that the student might otherwise not be able to accomplish” (p.274; Table 1), and when learners appear to be more autonomous, support is advisably withdrawn so that they can internalize acquired knowledge and experiences on their own.

Table 1. Description of scaffolding means in language teaching
(Adopted in Van de Pol et al., 2010, p.277)

Scaffolding mean	Are defined/described as...
Feeding back	The provision of information regarding the student's performance to the student him/herself
Giving hints	Entails the provision of clues or suggestions by the teacher to help the student go forward. The teacher deliberately does not supply the entire solution or detailed instructions under such circumstance.
Instructing	The teacher telling the students what to do or explanation of how something must be done and why
Explaining	The provision of more detailed information or clarification by the teacher.
Modeling	The process of offering behavior for imitation
Questioning	Asking students questions that require an active linguistic and cognitive answer

○ *Reading comprehension from sociocultural perspectives*

From sociocultural lens, reading comprehension process has taken place from the combination of three main

elements: the text, the activities, and the readers [15]. These three elements form a triangulation of the reading circle: the reader does the comprehending task, the text is to be comprehended, and the activity

is a part where the comprehension process takes place. That explains why these three elements cannot be separated from their sociocultural context.

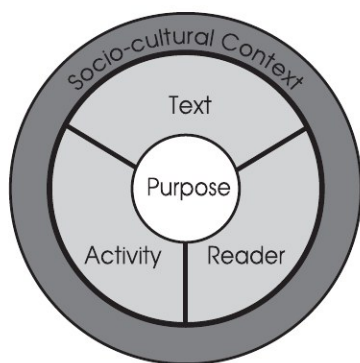


Fig 2. Variables that affect reading performance [15]

As can be seen from Fig. 2, reading comprehension is an active process where readers construct the meaning of the reading text by combining their prior knowledge and experience, the information in the text, and their views of the text. According to the SCT, learning is a process through which learners acquire knowledge from interactions with peers and experts that are more knowledgeable. With the guidance and support of their peers and experts, learners become more capable of performing tasks that are slightly beyond their own independent knowledge and ability. As such, they become more knowledgeable and experienced with the task, the supports are withdrawn while they internalize the acquired knowledge and experiences [17]. Vygotskian SCT, therefore, provides the basis for a different focus, which helps characterize reading comprehension as a result of different types of interaction occurring when the teachers provide their learners with mediation by different scaffolding techniques in order to

help the learners gradually withdraw from the teachers' assistance and become more independent readers.

o *Interactive Activities in Reading comprehension*

According to Hedge [5] in EFL reading class, interactive reading comprehension activities are those in which there is an interaction between the text and the reader while the reader is trying to make sense of the text. These activities are also those which require the interaction among/between different levels of knowledge of the reader during the process of making sense of the text. From the interactional angle, reading comprehension is viewed as a process in which a reader with a purpose in mind interacts with the text through a certain activity, extracting meanings for the purpose of comprehension. This proves that reading comprehension is an active and interpretive process rather than a receptive one as defined by Goodman (1998). Smith [14] adds that reading comprehension is an interactive process because readers constantly form hypotheses, test predictions, and use their knowledge to construct meaning.

Different from cognitive aspect of classroom interaction which puts stress on the individual mental activities when conceptualizing thinking and views interaction as supporting the individual's knowledge construction since it helps to activate existing knowledge of the individual, sociocultural perspective argues that although this is an individual task, it does not mean it excludes interaction with others. In other words, while cognitive perspective views reading

as an individual activity, and what happens in reading activities can take place inside the reader, sociocultural viewpoints regarded reading as interactive both internally and externally. The internal factors emphasize the students' language competence and their internal reading ability and the external factors focus on the teachers' interference and performance to students' reading ability, such as teaching methods, teaching materials, the content of reading lessons, and the potential application of learned knowledge in daily life. These two factors of interaction can foster or hinder learners' reading performance (Taladngoen, Palawatwichai, Estaban, & Phuphawan, 2020).

In the current trend of language teaching and learning, using IAs in FL classroom settings in general and in English reading in particular seems to be preferable by the teachers because they may meet the needs of students with different levels. In addition, even though it is not as perfect as expected, it is applicable in explaining, instructing, or fostering EFL students to read texts with the most excitement and effectiveness. IAs are, therefore, worth being applied in reading classes (Nunan, 1991; Safriyani, 2017, Walsh, 2011). These researchers affirm that IAs are of great importance since it is seen as interactional scaffolding activities which help the teacher allow his/her learners to interact and express their ideas but also guide them to become more reciprocal, which is considered to be essential for teachers to manage their class and the activities they set for their students in the lessons. In the present study, the term “interactive activities” is suggested as

teacher's interactional scaffolding activities taking place in an EFL reading class to motivate students' participation, collaboration, and exchanging ideas for constructing the meaning conveyed in the reading texts. This interpretation, on one hand, expresses the nature of interaction taking place inside a foreign language classroom; on the other hand, it serves the purpose of the present study which aims at investigating what teachers believe and what they really do in their reading class with the activities they design and/or organize to encourage their students' collaboration in reading lessons.

2.2 Methodology

○ *Research design*

In this study, a qualitative case design is regarded to be the best choice since it is appropriate with the overall research purpose, which aims to understand the selected EFL teachers' beliefs of employing interactive activities to foster their students' social interaction in reading classes and their practices within their teaching context.

○ *Research setting*

Within the scope of this study, the researcher does not intend to cover the beliefs and practices of all EFL teachers from different universities in Vietnam but only tries to focus on EFL teachers who are currently teaching EFL reading skills at a local university in north central Vietnam.

○ *Sampling*

Three EFL teachers coming from the Faculty of Foreign Languages of the selected university were invited to be the participants of this case study. As described in Table 2, the youngest participant is 35 years old and the oldest is 42. This age rank

Table 2. Information of the teacher participants

Profiles	Participants		
	Lisa	Rosie	Maria
Age	35	37	42
Gender	F	F	F
Qualification	MA in TESOL	MA in TESOL	MA in TESOL
Teaching experience	11	13	18
Majors	Reading, Writing, ESP	Reading, Writing, ESP	Reading, Writing, Business English

is in the normal range for the teachers to accumulate enough experience for their teaching career [2]. Therefore, in this study, the main focus was on these three selected teachers who had more than ten years of teaching experience and accumulated sufficient professional qualifications to meet the requirements that were indispensable in teaching tertiary students as regulated by the MoET of Vietnam. The participants' names were pseudo (Lisa, Rosie, Maria) in order for them to feel more secure and comfortable when taking part in the interviews or observation procedure conducted.

○ *Data collection*

In-depth interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews were chosen as the main instruments for this study.

Every interview was conducted in Vietnamese as the participants' suggestion and lasted from 15 to 20 minutes. All interviews were voice recorded by an MP3 device and transcribed for participants' checking before having it translated and double-checked. These data were used to compare and combine with the data

obtained from the classroom observation in order to seek an insight into EFL teachers' beliefs of IAs and their actual practice in helping students improve their social interaction skills in EFL reading classes.

The stimulated recall interviews lasted from 5 to 7 minutes. These interviews were to confirm and elicit what had been going on in the actual teaching of reading lessons. In other words, they aimed to recall the teachers' thoughts about their actions.

Twelve out of thirty periods of the whole course were observed by the researcher. Each period lasted 50 minutes. The reading classes were allocated with two teacher-instructed periods per week, which meant that the researcher spent six weeks observing each of the selected teacher participants. The researcher also recorded the whole teaching procedure of the teacher in chronological order instead of merely focusing on the IAs designed by them, which might help to minimize the researcher's own bias on the observed data. After finishing the observational task, all of the details observed were proceeded in the same way with the procedure of interview data transcription.

○ *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data collected.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. How EFL teachers perceived about interactive activities to foster students' social interaction skills in reading classes.

Social environment of the classroom is the place where teachers can interact with an individual student, a group of students or the whole class, and students can also interact with each other. IAs such as

discussing, negotiating, arguing, role-playing under pair, group, team or whole-class activities are organized with the aim of encouraging the students to be more active and engaged in dealing with tasks from the lower levels of thinking to the higher ones.

Lisa said: "I create chances for the students to interact with me (as teacher) and their partners in different activities such as negotiating, arguing, reviewing, summarizing, and so on with collaborative activities."

It seemed that the more chances students were given to work collaboratively in a reading classroom environment, the more communicative skills such as discussing, negotiating, sharing, arguing, etc. were fostered and enhanced.

Rosie added: "Interactive activities make the reading classes more socially collaborative and arouse students' high order thinking skills which can be seen as a contributory factor to the students' success in reading comprehension."

Maria's response also supported her colleagues.

She said: "Classroom is seen as a small social environment, so interactive activities not only help the students be positive in their learning process but improve their social interaction as well."

From the participants' response, it is indicative that improving students' social interaction skills in reading classes with IAs is very necessary since it creates a good social environment for the students to learn from each other.

Besides, social interaction creates a positive teaching - learning environment;

and provides a means for the students to have as deep understanding about the assigned reading topics and enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This finding advocated Lantolf [8] who regards classroom as a small social environment where teachers and students are the members of that "society", and the more interactive the classroom was, the more the students were motivated, positive and less anxious with their learning.

As revealed by the participants, the students are motivated to share their opinions, and they are also more confident and positive in the process of acquiring reading skills. In addition, when the students are motivated to join in reading activities from the lower levels to the higher level of understanding, they were able to not only remember vocabulary, understand the main content of the reading text, but also discuss, negotiate, debate, argue, guess, evaluate, analyze, create, and so on, which are much more complicated.

It is undeniable that reading can be well-achieved with individual efforts, but it may be more effective if the reading process is implemented in social collaboration through IAs. From the findings, it is probable that IAs employed in teaching EFL reading skills not only help facilitate classroom interaction between the teacher and student(s), but also promote students to be more active members in this environment. In addition, the process of teaching and learning reading should be fostered by collaborative work rather than fully dominated by the teacher because the students also actively participate in this process. Here, a student-centered teaching and learning approach which relied heavily

on hands-on activities, group work, pair work, projects, and discussion to engage students and encourage active participation was emphasized. This finding supports Meng and Wang's [9] viewpoint asserting that "group work activity is a good way to change the traditional teacher talk that dominates the class" (p. 102) and Jones and Jones' [7] findings stating that when students work together in English, they talk more, share more their ideas, learn more from each other, get more involved, felt more secure and less anxious, and enjoy using more English to communicate. This result of finding also highlights Brown's [3] definition of interaction that "interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other" (p. 165).

3.2. How EFL teachers foster students' social interaction skills in reading classes with interactive activities.

Using IAs in reading classes to create a collaborative working community is identified as a good way to facilitate students' social interaction skills. By providing students with different types of IAs for their collaboration such as idea - sharing, problem-solving, role-playing, question asking-answering and so on, the participating teachers could create a friendly and supportive learning environment, which emphasizes the collaborative community of learning by the construction of knowledge through social negotiation, as illustrated in the following extracts:

Extract #1 (Lisa's class)

T. Open your book, p 19. We are

going to read a passage about an adventure holiday. Would you like to go on an adventure holiday?

Ss. Yes

T. Why do you like it?

S1. I like strong feelings.

S2. I like discovering new things.

S3. I like challenging myself.

T. Oh, a lot of reasons....Now answer my question "Why should people go to Galapagos Island?"

By asking questions to get information about the students' interest in traveling, Lisa aimed to encourage her students to share their ideas and enable them to be more active and interactive in the reading lesson.

Extract #2 (Rosie's class)

(In a post-reading activity)

T. Now, it's time for exchanging your ideas about how to protect our environment.

S. In group. Ms?

T. No, in team - Two teams, ok?

S. Yes.

T. Good. Now, who is ONE, stand on the left; and who is TWO, stand on the right, Ok?

Ss. (quickly form the team)

T. What should we do to protect our environment? Team One?

Ss (team One). Use public transportation

T. Good, team Two

Ss. Plant more trees.

T. Yes, go on, team One...

As shown in this extract, Rosie encouraged her students to work in team in an integrated activity. By going around the divided teams, and assisted them in exchanging the answers, this teacher gave

her students a chance to interact and collaborate socially with one another.

Extract #3 (Maria's class)

T. Look at the reading text - Florida Keys, page thirty-two.

Can you get where Florida is?

Ss. America.....the US.....

T. Yes, it is a state in the US. How about Florida Keys. Can you guess?

Ss. A place of interest.

T. Good, a place of interest, or a tourist destination.

Now the text and decide if each of the ten given statements is correct or incorrect.

.....

T. Now, move your chair closer to your friend and check the answers.

This extract illustrated what Maria did to foster her students' interactional skills. Instead of asking the students to form groups or pair to do the reading task. It can be seen from the observation that most of the class time the teacher and the students exchange interactions directly. She did not usually organize group work or team work, apart from some pair work activities for the students to share or check their answers before showing to the teacher.

Findings of the present study add an interesting support in terms of the ways teacher organize their reading classes so that both teachers and students can play active roles when they collaborate with each other. In other words, it emphasizes Vygotsky's theories which stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition [17], and strongly affirms that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning" as presented by Vygotsky. It also advocates Khairunissa, Sumarsono and

Sumarni's (2019) study emphasizing the role of collaborative environment in making the students "socialize better with their peers" when they "work together to achieve a certain goal in learning" (p. 119). This finding suits the SCT perspective confirming that "learning is social and occurs in social context" (Vygotsky, 1978), "learning is mediated by language" (Vygotsky, 1986), and "learning or the development of concepts and higher mental functioning takes place within a student's zone of proximal development" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). These perspectives highly appreciated the social environment in reading classes since what an individual could accomplish when working in a social environment in collaboration with others was better than what he or she could have accomplished without any collaboration [20].

3.3. The congruence between teachers' perceptions and their practices in foster students' social interaction skills in reading classes.

From the findings, the researcher could find out that selected teachers' perception and practice were not always the same. There was less inconsistency or lower frequency of consistency between Maria's beliefs and practice in comparison with Lisa' and Rosie's. Typically, this teacher focused on guiding and explaining the reading texts and asked her students to read and did the attached reading tasks individually instead of organizing pair, group or team activities for the students to join. Interaction between teacher and students was dominated in most of the activities while very few student(s) -

student(s) interactions were implemented. In mind, she wanted to motivate her students in reading lessons as she thought that *applying IAs in teaching reading skills was very important*, and IAs aimed to *engage the students into a social collaborative atmosphere* in reading classroom (**Int.1. Maria**). She also thought that working in collaborative community such as pair work, group work, team work or class discussion could help raise the interest in reading lesson among students, make them more engaged, encouraged and confident, increase their practical use of communicative language, reduce passiveness and anxiety, etc. However, in actual teaching context, she did differently to some extent.

In addition, in Maria's belief, IAs should be used to facilitate students' positivity and confidence; yet, in practice, the teacher kept guiding the class most of the time. As observed, the teacher-talk frequency overwhelmed the total class time of the lesson. Instead of discussing, sharing ideas with others, the students mostly followed the teacher's guidance or instruction, listened to the teacher with little minimal interruptions. and the student-centered approach turned into teacher-centered approach. More than that, chances for students to correct misunderstandings or mistakes were not routinely provided by the teacher. For example, in an observed situation, Maria raised questions and gave hints continuously to help her students have the correct answer, and when there was a wrong answer, she helped correct it directly. This finding showed a contrast

with Swain and Lapkin's (1986, cited in [12]) stating that when learners were listening most of the time, they would only gain a general understanding of the language, and affirming that putting the learners in conversational situations to learn the language specifics would develop their communicative competence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated how EFL teachers perceived and acted to employ IAs in teaching reading skills in tertiary context in order to foster students' social interaction skills. It is summarized that teachers had positive or negative effects on the students' participation and collaboration in reading classes. All teacher participants were aware of the nature of the interactive teaching approach which emphasized student - centeredness, therefore, they tried not to control students in every reading activity. Instead, they created a collaborative learning environment where students are encouraged and motivated to participate in all reading activities in a positive and interactive way. Emphasizing collaborative working environment as a crucial element in making reading classes interactive, the selected teachers organized IAs in the form of pair work, group work, team work or even individuality interchangeably and flexibly. What the selected teachers perceived in terms of fostering students' social interaction skills was mostly compatible with what they actually acted in practice. However, the findings also pointed out the mismatch between the teachers' beliefs and their practice relating to the issue under investigation.

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