

Sosyal Etkileşime İlişkin Okutman Algıları ve Yabancı Dil Sınıflarında Uygulamaya Yansımaları

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ÖZ.Bu çalışmanın amacı okutmanların akademik sosyal etkileşim ve bunun dil gelişimi üzerindeki etkisine yönelik algılarını araştırmaktır. Araştırma bir devlet üniversitesinin yabancı diller yüksek okulunda gerçekleştirilmiştir ve altı okutman katılımcı olarak belirlenmiştir. Çalışmada olgubilim araştırma deseni kullanılmış ve okutmanlarla görüşme ve gözlemler yapılmıştır. Elde edilen veri, içerik analizi tekniği kullanılarak çözümlenmiştir. Araştırmanın sonuçlarına göre, rahat bir öğrenme ortamı, öğrenciler arası etkileşim, öğrenciler ve öğretmen arasında kişisel bir etkileşim kurma ile mizah sınıf içi etkileşimi kolaylaştıran unsurlardır. Öğrenciler arasındaki kültürel farklar, İngilizce hakimiyeti ve fazla kalabalık sınıflar sınıf içi etkileşimi engellemektedir. Yapararak öğrenme, günlük hayatta kendini ifade edebilme ve dil kullanımındaki gelişmeler ise sınıf içi etkileşimin yansımaları olarak bulunmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler:Sosyal etkileşim, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, yabancı dil gelişimi.

ÖZET

Amaç ve Önem:Bu çalışmanın amacı okutmanların akademik sosyal etkileşime yönelik algılarını ve bunun yabancı dil sınıfında uygulamaya yansımalarını incelemektir. Günümüzde iki yabancı dilden fazlasını konuşmanın önemi düşünüldüğünde, öğrenilen yabancı dili iletişim amaçlarını karşılayacak şekilde kullanabilmenin önemi anlaşılmaktadır. Bu nedenle, yabancı dil sınıfında sosyal etkileşim oluşturmak, öğrencilerin hedef dilde iletişim becerisi kazanması açısından hayati öneme sahiptir.

Yöntem:Bu çalışmada olgubilim araştırma deseni kullanılmıştır ve altı okutman ölçüt örnekleme yöntemiyle çalışmanın katılımcıları olarak belirlenmiştir. Okutmanlarla görüşmeler yapılmış ve dört sınıfta gözlemler gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Bulgular:Çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre rahat bir öğrenme ortamı, öğrenciler arası etkileşim, öğrencilerle dostane bir ilişki kurmak, öğrenciler ve öğretmen arasındaki kişisel etkileşim ile mizah sınıf içi etkileşimi kolaylaştıran unsurlardır. Öğrenciler arasındaki kültürel farklar, İngilizce hakimiyeti ve fazla kalabalık sınıflar sınıf içi etkileşimi engelleyen unsurlardır. Yapararak öğrenme, günlük hayatta kendini ifade edebilme ve dil kullanımındaki gelişmeler ise sınıf içi etkileşimin yansımaları olarak bulunmuştur.

Sonuç ve Tartışma:Araştırmanın sonuçlarına göre sınıf içi etkileşimi kolaylaştıran unsurlar,Gibbons (1998) tarafından belirtilen rahat öğrenme ortamı, öğrenciler arası etkileşim, işbirlikli çalışmalarla öğrencilere problem çözme fırsatları verilmesi ve öğrenciler ve öğretmen arasındaki kişisel etkileşim gibietkili dil öğretimi gereklerini destekler niteliktedir. Öğrencilerle dostane ilişkiler kurmak ve gerektiğinde mizah kullanmak önemlidir. Shmoossi (2004), öğretmen öğrenme ortamına mizahı dahil ettiğinde öğrencilerin derse katılmaya daha cesaretli olduklarını belirtmektedir.Çalışmanın katılımcıları, kendi özel hayatlarını öğrencileriyle paylaşarak onlarla kişisel bir ilişki kurduklarını belirtmişlerdir. Brookhart ve Loadman (1992) yaptıkları çalışmada bunu destekleyerek, “etkili öğretmenler gereken öğretmen-öğrenci rol yapısını korurken arkadaşça ve kişisel bir tutum sergiler” demektedir. Bunun yanında, öğrenciler ve okutmanlar arasındaki kültürel ya da kişisel farkların etkileşimi engelleyen unsurlardan biri olduğu belirtilirken, sınıf mevcudunun fazlalığından dolayı sınıf oturma düzeninin de etkileşimi engellediği ifade edilmiştir. İjaiya (1999), “oturma düzeni dersi ya etkili hale getirir ya da bozar” (p. 4) diyerek katılımcıların bu görüşünü desteklemektedir. İngilizce hakimiyeti etkileşimi engelleyen bir unsur olarak görülmüştür ve bu görüşü destekleyen Jackson (2002), öğrencilerin düşük seviyedeki etkileşiminin nedenlerinden biri olarak İngilizce yeterliliklerinin olmamasını göstermiştir. Katılımcılar rahat bir öğrenme ortamı oluşturduklarını belirtmiştir ve Consolo (2002), öğrencinin derse katılımını devam ettiren öğretmenlerden birinin olumlu bir ortamı olduğunu belirtmiştir. Sonuç olarak, sınıf içi sosyal etkileşim, öğretmen ve öğrenci rolü ile sınıf ortamı gibi bileşenlerle öğrencilerin dil gelişiminde büyük öneme sahiptir ve bu etkileşim ortamını engelleyen tüm etmenlerle dikkatlice ilgilenilmelidir.

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Instructors' Perceptions of Social Interaction and Its Practical Reflections in Foreign Language Classes

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to investigate instructors' perceptions of academic social interaction and its impact on language development. The study was conducted at a school of foreign languages of a state university and the participants were six instructors. The phenomenological research design was used and interviews and observations were conducted with the instructors. The data were analyzed using content analysis. The results of the study show that a comfortable learning environment, interaction between peers, building personal interaction between students and teacher, and humor are facilitators of in-class interaction. Cultural differences among students, good command of English and overcrowded classrooms are obstacles to interaction. The main impacts of in-class interaction are learning by doing, ability of expressing oneself in daily interaction and improvement in language usage.

Key words: Social interaction, English as a foreign language, foreign language development.

INTRODUCTION

The potential of academic social interaction in language classrooms in making learning meaningful and active has recently received much attention in the literature. This interaction is perceived as part of communicative and cooperative language teaching and a reflection of social constructivist approach to learning. Social constructivism forms the main pedagogical basis for the communicative approach (Nunan, 1999) in that it stimulates the interaction between students' thought and experience, and develops their cognition through ongoing and active constructions of more complex schemas (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky, the founder of social constructivism, was an advocate of social interaction as an integral part of learning. Social constructivism depends on social interactions of students in a classroom and much of Vygotsky's research and conceptual framework is included in social constructivism besides language development such as cognitive dialogue, the zone of proximal development, social interaction, culture and inner speech (Vygotsky, 1962; as cited in Powell & Kalina, 2009). Comprehending his theories or establishing a classroom where interaction is noticeable helps establish effective classrooms (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Furthermore, Jia (2003) asserts that for language learning to be effective enough, social interaction is to be established so as to increase the needs of communicating in the target language. Teachers and students might be called a classroom community where their social interaction gains great importance and is at the center of all the learning process. According to Smith (2001), teachers of second language learners can applaud this perspective, which strengthens language learning as socialization, not only cognition, which accepts the learner as an active participant in the learning process with previous knowledge and experience, and which recognizes teachers and students as co-constructors of meaningful interaction.

Communicative language learning is defined as a stress on learning to communicate via interaction in the target language (Nunan, 1991) and thanks to such interaction, students might improve their language ability as they listen to read authentic materials or the output of their peers in discussions, problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals (Rivers, 1987). As a matter of fact, interaction is the main component of communication in a period of communicative language teaching (Brown, 1994). Similarly, in a more recent study, Brown (2001) asserts that interaction is the cooperative exchange of opinions or emotions between two or more people, resulting in a mutual influence on each other. It also provides valuable opportunities for important processes that have been claimed to benefit the second language learning (Fujii & Mackey, 2009). A recent study conducted by Noom-ura (2008) aimed to find out the results of an intervention designed to improve the listening-speaking skills of university students who have low English proficiency. The target language functions involved giving personal and family information; giving directions and telling locations; doing shopping and ordering meals; and discussing future plans. These topics were selected as they seemed practical for

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daily life communication and the communicative approach was adopted with some 'fun' activities including games, songs, competitions, collaboration and role plays. The findings of the study indicated that the scores as well as the students' readiness, interests, and confidence in learning and using the target language through interaction significantly increased. The results also support the ideas of interactionists as they "view language learning as an outcome of participating in discourse, in particular face-to-face interaction" (Ellis, 2004, p. 78).

Learner initiative and participation in one's own learning stand for a significant aspect of in-class social interaction (Garton, 2002). Littlewood (1981) supports this view by saying that a lot of aspects of language learning can be realized via natural processes that operate when a learner uses the target language for communication purposes and his/her primary aim is to communicate with others (as cited in Jin, Singh & Li, 2005). However, it is not possible to maintain an interactive environment in a traditional classroom. Social interaction is possible in student-centered classrooms, students having the opportunity to take part in the learning process through collaboration with their peers and the teacher under the teacher's guidance. Likewise, Dewey (1938) mentions that the process of learning depends on a manner of 'shared inquiry' where the teacher is a part of the cooperative relationship with the student (as cited in Ruey, 2010). In this sense, a teacher-centered classroom cannot provide students with an interactive learning environment (Choudhury, 2005). This emphasis on communicative process gives different responsibilities to the teacher and the learner compared to other methods (Qinghong, 2009). In addition to having a guiding role in the classroom in a communicative learning environment, a teacher should have certain competencies in order to create the desired social interaction.

Demirel (2006) points out that it is vital to know the communication process in order to be an effective teacher and a teacher needs to construct a good communication with the students. Teaching through Interactions Framework, an empirically supported system to classify, conceptualize and evaluate classroom interaction between students and teachers in three areas that are emotional interaction domain, classroom organization domain and instructional interaction domain presents similar characteristics for teachers to be effective in the interactive process (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). These characteristics are teacher sensitivity to student needs, establishing friendly, sincere and respectful teacher-student relationships, considering students' perspectives, encouraging students' active participation in lessons and avoiding obtrusive disciplinary practices. All these traits can certainly contribute a lot to the teaching-learning environment as such teachers will be able to reach all their students by creating a warm and relaxed learning environment regardless of the students' different backgrounds.

What the literature tells about the importance of creating a warm and relaxed atmosphere seems to be in line with the study conducted by Woodrow (2006) on anxiety and speaking English as a second language. Accordingly, some of the major stressors based on interviews with students were found to be performing in English before classmates, speaking in English during classroom activities, speaking in English to strangers, not being able to understand what is told to them, talking about a subject unfamiliar to them and not failing to make themselves understood. Furthermore, the study indicated low anxiety for group discussions. This lends support to using collaborative techniques that promote student-student interaction in a more relaxed and supportive atmosphere as research also supports the fact that classrooms that are emotionally supportive can contribute greatly to student motivation, interest, enjoyment, and commitment (Marks, 2000; Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). Similarly, the value of both pair work and small group work as collaborative techniques has been acknowledged by many research studies (Cohen, 1994; Yackel, Cobb, & Wood, 1991, as cited in Kahveci & Imamoğlu, 2007). Moreover, research has proven that the layout of classrooms is effective on the atmosphere. For example, it has been found that socialization is less when students sit in rows; however, in U or V shaped classrooms or in classrooms where students sit in groups, there is much more socialization (Tutkun, 2007) and thus, a more interactive environment.

Remembering the importance of speaking more than two foreign languages in today's communication-oriented World regarding the fields of education, economics, tourism, trade and so on;

it is not difficult to understand the significance of being able to use the foreign language one knows in a proficient way satisfying communication purposes. Establishing social interaction in a language classroom is therefore crucial for students to gain the communicative competence in the target language. In light of this significance, this study aims to investigate instructors' perceptions of the use of academic social interaction in class and its impact on language development. The specific questions focused on how instructors create in-class social interaction, the challenges of creating in-class social interaction and the ways a socially interactive environment influences students' learning of English. By examining instructors' perceptions, it is hoped that this study will shed light on impact of social interaction in learning environment in English classes. Furthermore, the learners subject to this research are all adolescents, which seems to be different from most studies in the field, adding to the depth of the nature of social interaction in this case, as the type of interaction will be different with this age group. Most of the research conducted in this field, additionally, addresses anxiety, pair and group works, interactional feedback, group planning, communication obstacles of EFL students and oral interaction in task-based EFL learning, while this study is directly related to the EFL learning environment, namely in-class social interaction in the EFL classroom in a university preparatory school context.

METHOD

Research Design

This study attempts to explore instructors' perceptions of academic social interaction and its practical reflections in the EFL classroom. The purpose is to gain insight about the subjective perceptions and experiences of the participants and their interpretation of the phenomenon of social interaction in language classrooms. Therefore, a qualitative, phenomenological research design was used. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), phenomenology is the study of people's life experiences and "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved" (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 189). In line with the phenomenological tradition, interviews and observations were conducted with instructors so as to get in-depth information about their perceptions of in-class social interaction, the challenges they face while creating such an environment and the practical reflections in the classroom.

Sampling

This study was conducted at a school of foreign languages of a state university in Ankara. In line with the phenomenological research design of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with six instructors who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988, p. 150). According to Hycner (1999), "the phenomenon dictates the method including the participants" (p. 156). The number of the participants in this study was set to be six in order to gather in-depth information about the participants' experiences about the phenomenon. The instructors were selected through criterion sampling strategy. Criterion sampling can be practical in determining and understanding cases including rich information. Patton (2001) states criterion sampling includes choosing cases that fulfill some predetermined criterion of importance. The sample included instructors having more than five years of professional experience in the field so that rich information could be learnt about the phenomenon. In addition, this sampling strategy seemed to be appropriate owing to the fact that the researcher already has good knowledge of the population.

Among the six instructors in the sample, four were female and two were male. Three of these participants were teaching A1 level students, who begin from starter level and end up in intermediate level while the remaining three were teaching A2 level students, who begin from elementary level and end up in intermediate level. One of the instructors had six years of professional experience, two of them had seven years of professional experience; two had eight years of experience while one had over ten years of professional experience.

Field Work Plan

A school of foreign languages of a state university in Ankara was chosen as the site to conduct this research, and the researcher had no problems in gaining access to the field as she herself was an instructor there. Therefore, the researcher had good knowledge of the population to select a sample that would have high chances to yield valuable data.

Within the framework of phenomenology, phenomenological interviewing was conducted with the participants. As developed by Seidman (1998), three phases of in-depth interviews compose phenomenological inquiry (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The first one focuses on past experience with regard to the phenomenon studied, the second one focuses on current experience and the third one connects these two narratives to explain the participant's primary experience with the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The interviews were conducted within the framework of these three phases. This research design requires the researcher to write a full description of her own experiences with the phenomenon (called *epoche*) in order for these experiences not to have an impact on the research process.

The interviews produced detailed and in-depth data; therefore, audio recording was used to keep the records of the interview data, with the permission of the participants. Moreover, observations were conducted in four classrooms to deepen the data gathered through interviews. The researcher herself conducted the observations, through note-taking about the process on a pre-prepared observation form with codes written beforehand.

Epoche

As an English instructor myself, social interaction has always been significant for me in the classroom since I see it as one of the most essential components of the language learning environment. Therefore, I always try to have a good relationship with my students because in my opinion this is at the essence of establishing a socially interactive atmosphere in the classroom. The phenomenon means a communicative and cooperative environment where there are students asking, criticizing and sharing their ideas in the target language and without communication and cooperation among the students and the teacher, social interaction is impossible or too difficult to achieve. Learning a foreign language requires the learner to be completely active in the classroom which should include real life examples in its context. This is at the essence of social constructivism which supports learner centered classrooms. Hence in-class social interaction is quite essential in a foreign language classroom.

In my classes, the ways I create social interaction includes communicative and cooperative teaching methods including role plays, discussions, pair and group works, storytelling, video watching or presentations followed by sharing opinions and so on. Before that, at the beginning of a semester, I usually try to establish a friendly and comfortable atmosphere where the students feel safe and at ease. I try to make them believe in themselves and that they are all at an equal level in the target language, the underlying message of which is nobody can make fun of them owing to their poor knowledge, wrong pronunciation or whatever. I believe this really helps to prepare the ground to establish a socially interactive environment where I can easily use the above mentioned teaching methods. However, there might be no wonder some challenges I face in creating in-class social interaction. Firstly, there could be students who would like to stay away from an active role taking part in the activities or group works, etc. Sometimes this turns out to be a crucial problem since the learners are neither children nor adults; they are adolescents which is a critical period in youngsters' lives. Moreover, there might be students who are shy out of personality and unwilling to communicate. In such a situation, what to do is trying to include these students into the interaction as much as possible without offending or irritating them because social interaction is at the heart of language learning and a learning environment without it will be just a classroom where students learn grammar rules and vocabulary by rote with the teacher in the center of all learning process. In-class social interaction is an important component influencing students' learning of English through real life like situations in a natural way.

Data Collection Instruments

The main data collection instrument in this study is interview, also supported by the phenomenology design. Interviews included questions about the instructors' perceptions of the use of in-class social interaction in the EFL classroom, what they do to create such an environment, the challenges they face about this issue and in what ways in-class social interaction affects students' learning of English. The questions were grouped in three phases, in other words, focusing on the past and present experiences of the participants about the phenomenon of interest and the combination of these to reveal their essential experience and perceptions of in-class social interaction in the EFL classroom. The necessary sub-questions and prompts were included to collect as much in-depth information as possible from the participants. The themes emerged through the use of the interview form and covered during the interviews were classroom climate, classroom activities, change in teaching approaches, obstacles to social interaction and language improvement, with additional sub-themes and codes.

Additionally, an observation schedule was developed including pre-written themes and codes to make it easy for the researcher to take notes during the observation. The data were collected on three aspects of the classroom environment, the first of which was context, namely the physical setting, human setting and scheduling patterns, the second of which was flow of the lesson and the last was physical and verbal behavior patterns. The themes emerged during the observations were students' communication, teachers' communication, students' body language, students' behaviors as indicators of their feelings, activities and effect of the interactive environment on language usage.

Data analysis

The data collected through interviews and observations were transcribed and read carefully to see what themes emerged. Afterwards, the main themes, codes and sub-codes were written within the framework of content analysis process. Content analysis is a systematic technique to sum up many words of text into fewer categories depending on certain rules of coding and it can be an effective technique in terms of enabling us to explore and identify the focus of the individual, group, institutional or social attention (Weber, 1990). The themes and codes were used to write the results section.

Validity and Reliability

Patton (2001) mentions that validity and reliability are two issues about which any researcher conducting a qualitative study should be worried about while planning a study, analyzing results and considering the quality of the study. According to LeCompte and Goetz (1982), reliability refers to the extent to which studies can be replicated and validity requires an indication that the propositions produced, clarified or tested match the casual circumstances which obtain in human life. Examining trustworthiness is significant to guarantee reliability in qualitative research. While conducting high quality studies in terms of reliability and validity issues in qualitative research, the trustworthiness of the study depends on these frequently discussed issues that are called validity and reliability (Seale, 1999; as cited in Golafshani, 2003). The techniques used in this study to ensure trustworthiness were prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, members' checks and thick descriptions.

Prolonged engagement, which means spending sufficient time in the field and persistent observation, which involves learning more about the culture of those studied and building rapport with them are also important ways of establishing trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), prolonged engagement is useful in providing scope while persistent observation is useful in providing depth. Peer debriefing is helpful in establishing credibility by allowing a peer with some general understanding of the study to examine materials, test hypothesis and the designs that emerge, and listen to the researcher's thoughts and concerns (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The member check, through which data, categories, codes, interpretations and findings are tested with members of the groups from

whom the data were originally collected, is the most significant technique for ensuring credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before the final report was submitted, a member check was conducted by supplying the whole copies of the study to a review panel of respondents and other people in the setting where the study was conducted (Erlandson et al., 1993). In reporting qualitative research, the researcher is responsible for providing extensive and carefully detailed description of the context of study and its participants, which is called thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher being an instructor in the field of study in this research spent sufficient time in the field and learned about the culture and characteristics of those studied by using the rapport she had with them, which satisfied the requirements for prolonged engagement and persistent observation. Furthermore, the study was conducted with a researcher seeking agreement in every step of the research process in order to fulfill the condition of peer debriefing. The findings and interpretations of this study were sent to the participants to see if they agreed with them or not under the concept of member checks. Moreover, thick descriptions about the context, participants and data collection procedures were provided to the readers to allow transferability. Lastly, the interviews were recorded by the researcher so that she was able to gather every expression uttered by the participants. With the aforementioned techniques, it was possible to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the data yielded five themes: classroom climate, classroom activities, change in teaching approaches, obstacles to social interaction and language improvement. Classroom climate has three sub-themes, which are defined as teacher role, student role and classroom layout and obstacles to social interaction has three sub-themes defined as good command of English, differences among students and the instructor and overcrowded classrooms. The results are presented according to the aforementioned themes, sub-themes and their codes.

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Classroom Climate

One of the most important components of academic social interaction was set as classroom climate by the participants. The teacher, students and layout have a significant impact on creating an effective interactive climate in the classroom.

Teacher role: The teacher roles identified by all instructors in interviews are encouragement, guidance and positive feedback, which are used to create a positive and comfortable environment where students, even those with lower achievement levels, can feel relaxed and encouraged to be involved in the communicative interaction process that is aimed to be achieved by all instructors. The observations showed that students tried to give peer feedback and support to their friends in the activities with the guidance of their teacher and they seemed to be eager to do this in a serious manner, which backed up the social interactive environment tried to be created by the instructor. Hendrickson (1987) states that compared to error correction made by the teacher, although it might be helpful for most of the students, peer correction or self-correction under the guidance of the teacher might be more helpful for some teachers and students. Brandl (2008) asserts that the provision of “error corrective” and “positive” feedback as a fundamental principle of communicative language teaching permeates all areas of instruction and constitutes a necessity in support of the learning process. The observations also indicated that the instructors try hard to create a positive learning

climate for all students. Accordingly, the students used a lot of different ways to communicate with the teacher and each other, and the climate was comfortable and relaxing leading to warm interaction during the lessons.

Humor Another component of the interactive classroom climate that was mentioned by the instructors during the interviews was humor and it is used by all participants to promote the learning process in a positive way. This is achieved by telling anecdotes or even instructors' sharing their private life with the students using family albums which also arouse a feeling of sympathy between instructors and students. This is supported by literature claiming that the sociable character of the teacher is important in building effective relationships and an efficient learning atmosphere in a class. It also helps to avoid problems coming up as a result of the lack of communicative competence. Typically, a sociable teacher is more apt to share her/his knowledge with students and, furthermore, to encourage them and building a closer and trustful relationship with the teacher encourages the student to participate in communicative activities with more confidence and, in this way, to deal with language barrier (Petkutė, 2010).

The observations supported instructors' perceptions of how they created social interaction in the classroom as the students were usually joking and laughing as a demonstration of their positive feelings towards the lesson and the teachers, who responded to them in the same way. The teachers usually tried to arouse interest and trigger curiosity among the students especially through real life questions to the whole class and sharing their own experiences. The teacher's flexible and positive attitude seemed to help students be included actively and eagerly in the process; however, from time to time, some students were observed to be distracted and bored which could be understood from their body language such as yawning, looking through the window, making noise or ignoring the teacher and even their peers. Yet the teacher did not give up encouraging the students to participate actively in the process leaving them free to move as they want especially during the group activities and it seemed to work for most of the students. Moreover, some students seemed to perceive this flexible communicative learning environment in a different way and behaved in a disrespectful way singing Turkish songs and hitting desks, which might be because of the fact that the expectations of the teacher or objectives of the lesson had not been explained clearly to these students. This is in line with what the literature tells about distraction of students as a result of an interactive environment. Accordingly, Choudhury (2005) states that teacher guidance is crucial for the classroom interaction to continue, as without such guidance, students can quickly become distracted and it might be hard to realize the class objectives while the social interaction is still communicative. The interviews also revealed that to establish the desired interactive classroom climate, the instructors collect information about their students at the beginning of the semester so as to know about them and intervene with their problems in the classroom as effectively as possible and this also promotes the positive environment. The instructors prefer not to have too much pressure on students having difficulty in participating in the social interaction.

Student role: As for student role in classroom climate, students are expected and directed by instructors to contribute to the interactive learning environment through peer feedback and peer support, especially for those with a lower level of competency. Crandall (1999) highlights the benefits of such feedback, where he mentions that receiving feedback from peers, and so becoming more successful decreases anxiety among learners and can promote more participation in the language learning process (Crandall, 1999). Machado de Almeida Mattos (2000), in his study where he applied Vygotskian concepts to show scaffolding can enable learners to extend their language competence by collaborating with more capable peers, found that through scaffolded interaction, learners can adopt different but complementary roles to achieve the task. Thus a task designed to promote complexity of language might benefit from pair or group interaction by encouraging risk-taking. Moreover, Donato (1994) employed socio-cultural theory to demonstrate how learners are talented at scaffolding one another's

contributions, as a result of which what they can accomplish as a group in the target language exceeds what they can do individually (as cited in Ellis, 2004). This is also consistent with the collaborative learning environment as each learner is not only held responsible for his/her own learning but also is stimulated to increase of others (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 8). Moreover, the instructors expect the students to respect and tolerate their peers' differences in order to be a coherent group and not to disturb the relaxing environment necessary to the communicative environment. The instructors mention that this social interaction will make students feel more self-confident and interested in the target language. This is consistent with the results of the study conducted by Kuo (2011) on how learners in a British EFL setting perceive the classroom practice of student–student interaction. Accordingly, group dynamics were found to have an effect on learners' performance regarding classroom interactive tasks and then form learner's perception of classroom student–student interaction. The observation data also showed that students were eager to help their peers – especially those seeming to be in a lower achievement group – as they were helping each other to find the correct word while speaking or not kidding when a word was pronounced wrongly, etc. Thus, it can be inferred that instructors have achieved forming coherent learner groups in these classes with students respectful to each other, a priority of a communicative and cooperative class.

Classroom Layout

The interview data indicated that the classroom layout should also be flexible and comfortable according to the instructors with students sitting not in rows or a distorted U layout but in groups with fewer students instead of a crowded class and a chance to move freely. As creating social interaction in a classroom is best promoted through communicative and cooperative tasks and as these require students moving freely in the classroom, coming together and working, discussing or sharing information with each other, the layout of the classroom seems to be really crucial in the effectiveness of learning environment. The instructors also stated that there should be posters on walls, colors of which must be brighter so that students can be more attracted to in-class activities. In line with the interview data, the observations indicated that students had difficulty in moving around or coming together in communicative and cooperative tasks because of the distorted U layout in the classrooms, which is due to the fact that there are over twenty students in classes. This made some students bored during the activities as they had difficulty in moving around, stubbing or knocking together.

Classroom Activities

A variety of classroom activities have been mentioned by instructors as a way to establish a socially interactive learning environment in the language classroom. The instructors emphasize that warm-up is one of the most important parts of a lesson where students are prepared to learn and activate their schemata about the following subjects. When what instructors stated as the most frequently used classroom activities such as peer learning, group work, pair work, dialogues and discussions are examined with a closer look, they can all be described as communicative and cooperative activities which are appropriate to the nature of a socially interactive learning environment. Petkutė (2010) states that it is important for a language teacher to make use of distinct forms of dialogue such as conversation, debate, dispute and discussion to activate the social dynamics of a classroom and promote social interaction. Additionally, brainstorming and real life examples are also mentioned to be used frequently and these both improve students' interactive abilities and strengthen the connection of the lesson with real life issues. The observations conducted confirmed what the instructors told during the interviews as they all used warm-up at the beginning of the lesson as a basis for the following interactive activities like debates, conversations, etc. through group works and the classes observed were really busy with communicative activities and an intense interaction and cooperation was seen among the students and the teachers with the help of real life questions, problems, experiences, etc. This is consistent with what Rivers (1987) mentioned about teachers' flexibility in using different techniques. Accordingly, “teachers need to be flexible, with a repertoire of techniques they can employ as circumstances dictate, while keeping interaction central” (Rivers, 1987, p. 6). During the interviews, the instructors mentioned they use a wide range of materials such as films,

pictures, visual materials, etc. to include the students in a communicative way of teaching language. What instructors do seems to be to the point according to Qinghong (2009) as he puts forward that the primary purpose of social interaction activities is to provide the learners with an opportunity to use the language in a convenient social context, to make up various social situations as well as relationships, e.g. pair/group tasks: discussion, simulations and role-play.

Change in Teaching Approaches

One thing that is really noteworthy in the interview data is that there is a significant change in the teaching approaches used by the instructors throughout their profession. While they were using a structured lecturing method with a teacher-centered approach which was embedded with their lack of humor and immediate corrections during the lesson leading students' discouragement and over anxiety, they have been using a student-centered approach with a lot of cooperation and communication between students and a humorous environment for a few years. This seems to be consistent with what Seedhouse (1999) mentions about the new shift in foreign language teaching. Accordingly, the contemporary history of second language teaching methodology has witnessed a change from the consideration of teaching methods alone towards a focal point on in-class interaction as the most essential component of the second language learning process (Savignon, 1999). As for humor, Weaver and Cotrell (1987) assert that humor serves social, psychological and communication functions. As a social function, it is used to establish relationships; as a psychological function, to relieve anxiety and tension, or to escape from the reality, and as a communication function, to introduce a topic, lecture, or a course. Likewise, Woods (1983) puts forward that humor as a facilitator eases teaching and learning as well as helping the establishment of a cultural bond between teacher and students. Therefore, adding humor to the learning environment in the language classroom seems to facilitate the social interaction process. The observation data indicated that especially during group work activities, the teachers and students were inclined to use humor, which seemed to be making the students more relaxed and self-confident to use the target language as well as making learning much more fun for them. Furthermore, the teachers were more like friends to the students in a humorous learning environment; however, maintaining their roles as a facilitator. The participants of the study think that the way instructors interact with their students influence students' behavior during the lessons. Similar results were found in another study conducted on the factors contributing to student reticence. Accordingly, Tsui (1996) found that the video/audiotaped classroom data demonstrated that teachers' attitudes with regard to interacting with students, i.e. intolerance of silence, inexplicable input, and short wait time, are factors promoting silence in classrooms. During the interviews, the participants of the study added that the seminars and their other professional development studies have taught them lots of different and interesting methods that can be used to be more effective teachers in creating an interactive learning environment.

Obstacles to Social Interaction

The participants of the study set obstacles to social interaction as an important component of creating academic social interaction in the language classroom. Accordingly, good command of English, differences among students and the instructor and overcrowded classrooms were found to be as important obstacles to social interaction.

Good command of English: For one thing, it was found that instructors thought of good command of English as an important prerequisite of social interaction and they implied that the level of social interaction increases as the level of English used by students increases. This is supported with the findings of the study conducted by Kuo (2011) on student perceptions of interaction in an EFL classroom, where one of the participants was found to have difficulty in building interaction as she had a struggle to give a recipe in English due to her lack of L2 capability. During the observations, it was seen that most of the students failed to give adequate answers to the teacher or their peers during group works, which might be due to their lack of self-confidence or knowledge of the target language and as instructors mentioned, it seemed to disconcert the interaction. Furthermore, the number of students was over 23 in

every class observed and it was really difficult for the students to move, which is a must in most group work activities.

Differences among students and the instructor According to the instructors, time limit and the overloaded curriculum as well as the crowded classes make it really hard for them to reach their aim of teaching English in a communicative environment. Three instructors talked about the generation gap among the students and the teachers as an obstacle to social interaction as they have difficulty in finding a common topic to talk about or a topic known by everybody. This might be an interesting topic to be studied in further researches. In addition, there is cultural differentiation among the students as well, as some of them like “KurtlarVadisi” while others hate it and prefer “How I Met Your Mother,” which is accepted as another obstacle by the instructors. Similarly, in a study conducted by Kuo (2011) on student perceptions of student interaction in a British EFL setting, it was found that subjects like “guns and drugs” were perceived rather remote by some learners and therefore, discussions on those topics did not promote imagination or creativity. In addition, in spite of being aware of the dilemmas guns and roses introduced to society, learners in that study were not interested in talking about them, as a result of which there was poor interaction in the class. In the context of this study, the cultural difference among the learners was mentioned to cause a gap in social interaction as some topics would attract one group of students while another topic would appeal to another group. In this regard, Johnson (1995) states that teachers must be aware of the possible differences in second language students’ linguistic as well as interactional skills and that such difference does not show any cognitive or social flaws. The observations showed some of the so-called interaction gaps during classes. For example, in one of the classrooms, the subject was nuclear weapons – a so-called popular and hot topic – and while some of the students were really eager to talk and share their ideas during a discussion activity, some seemed to be rather indifferent to the subject. When the teacher, in order to give an opportunity to everyone, asked their opinions regarding the topic, they said they did not have much to say, no idea at all, and that they wouldn’t be able to say much even in their mother tongue.

Overcrowded classrooms The overcrowded classrooms has also been mentioned as an obstacle in every interview owing to the fact that the U layout is distorted with some additional desks in the middle of the classroom due to the high number of students per class and this limits the free movement of students in pair and especially group works. In every classroom that was observed, the U layout was distorted and there was a chaos before every group activity as students had to stand up to form groups or to conduct the task given to them. Empty walls and colorless classrooms are also seen as an obstacle making the classrooms “not like language classrooms”.

Language Improvement

The impact of academic social interaction on language development is one of the phenomena of interest for this study and the main impacts have been found as learning by doing, including students in the learning process, ability of expressing oneself in daily interaction and improvement in language usage as a result of these. In this regard, Lier (1988) believes that thanks to in-class interaction, a language can be learned best through the real performance and the expanded knowledge and he also draws attention to the significance of meaningful interaction to learning with regard to process and its potential result. Ideally, for classrooms to build more symmetrical social relationships among learners, opportunities for learners to have more rights to talk should be guaranteed. Classrooms that offer these possibilities are probably a better environment for learning, as the distance between teacher and learners is reduced. This fact had been widely recognized by foreign language teachers long before the communicative movement, and effective teachers have always encouraged learners to use the foreign language as much as possible (Gil, 1999). Furthermore, cooperative learning through pair and group works using discussions, role-play, simulations, etc. helps develop interaction among students as mentioned by the instructors. Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) state that collaboration is useful for both low and high-aptitude students as the first group get input via

cooperative learning whereas the second group, through interaction, improve their understanding while describing concepts to their peers. Research on cooperative learning presents that cooperation has positive effects on students in terms of their relationships with one another, self-respect, long-term retention, and their understanding of course material; therefore, it is found to be one of the most effective and constructive strategies in teaching (Zhang, 2010).

In summary, the results show that the interviewees think academic social interaction is of the first order of importance in a language classroom and they establish the environment in a way appropriate to create and maintain it. They organize a relaxing classroom climate where the roles of the teacher and students are well defined and applied with proper in-class activities. They find such an approach helpful in improving the language usage of the students and try to cope with the obstacles to social interaction in a variety of ways. The participants of this study can be defined as instructors who try to improve themselves professionally through seminars and self-study, which have helped them change their approaches and teaching methods throughout the years in favor of student-centered and communicative approaches. Additionally, as a result of the observations, it can be concluded that student-student and teacher-student interaction have a great role in the establishment and maintenance of a communicative language learning environment. This interactive environment adds greatly to the quality of the lessons making language learning very meaningful, encouraging and practical for the students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that there are certain facilitators of classroom interaction in line with what Gibbons (1993) declared as components of good language teaching: comfortable learning environment, interaction between peers, providing opportunities for students to be problems solvers through cooperative tasks, building personal interaction between students and the teacher, presenting understandable models of language and asking effective questions. In line with the findings of this study, Kumpulainen and Wray (2002) state the results of the research studies in this field indicate that a complex and open learning environment, students initiating meaning-making, opportunities to approach a task with different problem-solving strategies and opportunities to use formal and informal language increase the students' active participation in interaction in the classroom.

In terms of the classroom climate theme, establishing good rapport with students was accepted to be vital in maintaining the interactive atmosphere according to the participants of this study, which is supported by the literature where Khine and Fisher (2004) in their study found it was compulsory for teachers to establish positive teacher–student relationships and build empathy with their students so as to accomplish and encourage interaction. Humor is an important component used by the participants of this study to promote interaction in the language classroom. Shmoossi (2004) puts forward that when the teacher includes a piece of humor into the atmosphere of the classroom, students are encouraged to participate in the lesson more than when it is a gloomy atmosphere with the teacher as the only speaker. The participants of this study also establish a personal relationship with students inquiring about their lives and sharing their own private life with them, as they claim this has a positive effect on in-class interaction. Brookhart and Loadman (1992) support this by asserting that effective teachers persistently behave in a friendly manner while preserving a convenient teacher-student role structure. In line with this finding, Bishop (2000) states teachers should build a friendly learning climate and to succeed in doing this, teachers should devote a part of the class time to learning students' names, asking about their lives, or sharing something about their own lives (as cited in Zengin, 2008). Furthermore, on part of students, they are expected to promote the interactive learning environment through pair and group works as well as peer feedback and this learner-centered strategy is believed to be especially useful for passive or silent learners owing to the fact that their motivation to participate might increase thanks to peer support and negotiation of meaning, in which they are involved (Kennedy, 1996; as cited in Garrett & Shortall, 2002). In this study, Mazur (1998) also suggests using interactive pedagogies which are capable of engaging students in peer discussion and interactive activities under the guidance of the teacher, as these can result in effective learning for students. Moreover, “the peer group is a powerful resource to the learner, providing a wide range of models of language use, and the need to communicate offers the learner a real motivation to use

language” (Gibbons, 1998, p. 11). The observations indicated that sometimes students seemed to be distracted and started speaking in Turkish with some other misbehavior. In the same sense, through interviews conducted with teachers, Zengin (2008) found out teachers do not have a tendency to prepare pair work or group work activities as in such activities, students tend to chat or make loud noise and destroy the learning atmosphere. In the same study, teachers also reported that students have a tendency to switch into Turkish in pair or group work activities.

The cultural or personal difference among students and the instructors was reported as an obstacle to establishing social interaction in the classroom by the instructors. In this point, Rivers (1987) makes some suggestions for teachers to overcome such obstacles to interaction such as taking the student profile into consideration, choosing teaching materials appropriate for students’ needs and applying teaching methods appropriate for students. Additionally, classroom layout was reported to prevent effective interaction especially as it is a distorted U layout due to the high number of students. In line with this finding, Ijaiya (1999), in his study, found out that the seating issue in crowded classes brings limitations to the quality and quantity of social interaction between the teachers as well as the students and also on the quality of teaching-learning process and asserted that “the seating arrangement can make or mar any lesson” (p. 4). Good command of English was seen as an obstacle to students’ meaningful interaction, which is supported by the work of Jackson (2002), where it was found that a few of the causes regarding Chinese students’ low interaction levels were a lack of opportunities to communicate in English and the lack of their English competence and confidence. In his study, McCroskey (1992) confirmed that learners experiencing a high level of communication apprehension withdraw from and try to avoid communication whenever possible (as cited in Liu & Jackson, 2008). Therefore, it is important to facilitate the interactive learning environment. In the present study, the participants claimed to create a relaxing atmosphere, thanks to which students could feel more confident to speak. Consolo (2002) asserts that student participation in classroom discourse can be motivated by a combination of factors, one of which is the establishment of a favorable environment, especially in terms of an atmosphere of confidence, in which students will ‘risk’ using the target language for classroom communication.

The limitation of the present study is that it was conducted during the 2010-2011 academic years in a school of foreign languages of a state university with six instructors having more than five years of teaching experience. Furthermore, as the researcher herself works as an instructor in the same school, an epoche was provided for the readers to assure that the researcher is free from bias regarding the phenomenon of interest. Besides, it was assumed that the participants gave truthful answers to interview questions. Although the study is limited to a particular context, the results seem to be compatible with similar studies concerning classroom interaction in foreign language classrooms. A final conclusion for this study might be that in-class social interaction in a foreign language classroom is significant in students’ language improvement with a number of components including teacher and student role and classroom climate and any obstacles to that interactive environment should be dealt carefully.

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