

# Conditions for teaching English to young learners: Indonesian teachers' perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

English teachers' beliefs are one of the captivating topics to study as they contribute the quantity of input for reflection and the enhancement of English teaching and learning. This case study aims at investigating the teachers' beliefs about the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in English class in elementary school and how they translate their beliefs into routine instructional actions. Semi-structure interviews and classroom observations were conducted to collect the data involving three English teachers at a selected private elementary school in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. The findings show that all of the participants were aware that the role of exposure was essential in learning a foreign language, motivation was a vital factor to achieve the objective of the learning and practice was a central part of proficiency development, and consistent with this, a great deal of effort has been conducted to provide exposure to English, to motivate students, and to create opportunities for students to use English. Hence, the results of the study are expected to give a worthy contribution to teachers of English as a second language, especially at elementary schools and other researchers dealing with exposure, motivation, and practice in learning English.



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## 1. Introduction

As the first foreign language taught in Indonesia, English has been widely offered in Indonesian schools from the elementary level. Different from the secondary school curriculum, elementary schools do not include English as a compulsory subject, especially after the 2013 curriculum was applied. English which used to be compulsory for grades 4, 5, and 6, is now put in the extracurricular program for two reasons: students at elementary school are to be exposed more to local content, and subjects at the elementary level are considered overloaded. Even so, many elementary schools, especially private ones still offer it as a subject (Meisani, 2020a, 2020b). The consideration of introducing English as a second language (ESL) to young learners is in line with Hu (2007) and Nunan (2003) who recommend a learning foreign language at an early age.

The terms English as a second language and English as a foreign language are often used interchangeably. According to Willans (2019), English as a second language or L2 means a language that a person hears and sees it used all around them in their daily lives but does not speak it much at home (Borg, 2001). Instead, English as a foreign language is considered the language in which a person's exposure to the language is primarily restricted to the classroom. In the context of the present study, English as a second language refers to any language that is not a mother tongue of

the speaker and is learned later at school or at any other formal and informal setting (Stefansson, 2013).

Discussing about English teaching and learning practices at schools, it is evident that language teachers' decisions about how and what to teach should considerably rely on learners' differences in terms of their age, aptitude, personalities, learning styles, language levels, and motivations (Harmer, 2001). Furthermore, concerning either internal or external factors affecting second language learning, Spolsky (1989) progresses seventy-four conditions that may determine the achievement of the various possible outcomes. Among those conditions, five aspects had been taken for further study within the Indonesian context by Musthafa and Hamied (2014), are the exposure condition, the motivation condition, the opportunity for practice condition, the communication condition, and the learning goal condition. A national survey that involved 55 Indonesian secondary school teachers of English was conducted to investigate their beliefs towards those conditions and what they do to promote students' learning. The findings show that Indonesian 3 teachers of English considered those factors to be important and indirectly trigger them to do significant efforts during teaching and learning activities.

Related to the above findings, it is undeniable that the interaction and integration of a large number of factors affect the results of language learning. There are both internal and external factors that may become the conditions by which the success of language learning is influenced (Jin et al., 2014). For this reason, Spolsky (1989) states that good language teachers are the ones who are able to be eclectic; language teachers should be able to accept new proposals and be flexible to the students' needs and learning objectives. Related to the above previous research, it is without a doubt important to count on teachers' beliefs since they act as a kind of informative framework through which they make sense of what they do in their classrooms. According to Larenaz et al. (2015), beliefs are a frame of reference around which many classroom decisions are made and pedagogical practices are decided. Beliefs affect practices and some practices affect beliefs causing reorientation. Moreover, as the link between beliefs and practice in teacher education is central to understanding the quality of language teaching and learning (Farrell & Bennis, 2013), it is noteworthy to conduct further studies to investigate teachers' beliefs in teaching-learning English, especially in the Indonesian context.

Seeing the learners' differences from any aspect, teaching English as a second language to children or young learners requires teachers to use certain approaches by pointing out particular characteristics of children that teachers should be aware of and take into account in their teaching (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Besides the factors that come from the learners and the policy of teaching-learning English in Indonesia, it cannot be avoided that the problems that occurred from the teachers' side also affect the teaching-learning process and its outcomes. Mismatched academic backgrounds, lack of academic qualifications, and inadequate English proficiency are the problems related to teachers' quality (Hamied, 2012). Lengkanawati (2014) adds by pointing out that Indonesians' perspective on the teaching-learning process paradigms is still in the form of transferring knowledge by the teacher to the 4 learners; learners are still being spoon-fed and not yet accustomed to finding needed information by themselves. In addition, as students spend most of their English learning time at school with their English teachers and see their teachers as models in learning the language, the teachers' role becomes very consequential. However, if the class is not appropriately designed, it may increase students' dependency on teachers.

Responding to the disagreement among decision-makers about the idea of teaching English at elementary schools (Meisani, 2020a, 2020b; Setiasih, 2012), seeing the challenges of teaching English as a Second Language for children, and seeing the teachers' knowledge and ability in teaching ESL, this study aims at investigating what elementary school teachers of English think is important related to the exposure, motivation, and practice (Spolsky, 1989) of teaching ESL for elementary schools students and how they translate their beliefs into routine instructional actions. Besides, it will see whether any other conditions are underlying the teaching of English to children in the Indonesian context (Tseng, Y., 2014).

The studies examining the teachers' beliefs as well as their instructional efforts to promote conditions in language learning have been conducted by several researchers. Within the Indonesian context by Musthafa and Hamied (2014), they are the exposure condition, motivation condition, the opportunity for practice condition, communication condition, and learning goal condition. A

national survey had been conducted involving 55 Indonesian secondary school teachers of English to investigate their beliefs towards those conditions and what they do to promote students' learning. The findings demonstrate that Indonesian English teachers see those aspects as vital and, as a result, make great efforts during teaching and learning activities. The second related previous study was done by Qadir and Riaz (2014) who did a comparative study on private, public, and madrasa institutions in Pakistan. They wrote that a lot of Pakistani students become proficient in English and achieve high standards of academic excellence due to the importance and prestige associated with the use of English supported by the educational policies; this has motivated the students a lot to acquire proficiency in English. In addition, in 2015, Larenaz et al. did a case study on EFL teachers' beliefs about the teaching and learning of English in public education. The findings of this study show that beliefs were entrenched in teachers' semantic retention as cognitive as well as affective constructs that embrace diverse degrees of fixation relying upon the teachers' experiences on academic, professional, or personal activities.

Different from prior research mentioned in the previous section, this study focuses on scrutinizing teachers' beliefs about the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in English class and what they do in the classroom related to those beliefs. The level of education which becomes the center of attention in this study is elementary school. Thus, it is intended to investigate the beliefs of English teachers at a selected Indonesian elementary school which includes English as a compulsory subject related to the mentioned conditions. Thus, the problems of the study are formulated as follows: 1. What do English teachers at elementary school believe about the roles of exposure to English, motivation in learning English, and practice using English? 2. What efforts do English teachers at elementary school make to promote students' English learning given the learning conditions which are related to exposure to English, motivation in learning English, and practice using English?

Referring to the objectives of the study, the results of this study are theoretically expected to document and provide data about elementary school teachers of English towards their beliefs as well as their efforts in English classrooms related to promoting students' exposure, motivation, and practice in English. On the practical side, the results of the study are expected to give a worthy contribution to EFL teachers, especially at elementary schools and other researchers dealing with exposure conditions, motivation conditions, and practice conditions in learning ESL. Due to the limited scope and coverage of the present study, it is suggested that future researchers conduct a further study involving both teachers and students to capture teachers' inner workings of instructional decision-making and students' language learning processes.

## 2. Method

This part describes how the research was conducted. It contains some points related to research methodology on how to investigate teachers' beliefs on the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in ESL class. The research design, data collection, subjects, instrumentations, procedure of data collection, and data analysis are as follows.

### 2.1. Research Design

The present research is a case study focusing on investigating the beliefs of elementary school teachers of English about the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in EFL class. It is a rounded study as it approaches the participants and the backgrounds in which they teach. (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Sealey, 2010; Wei & Moyer, 2008). Figure 1 below shows the overall research design implemented in this study and is further explained in the following sections.

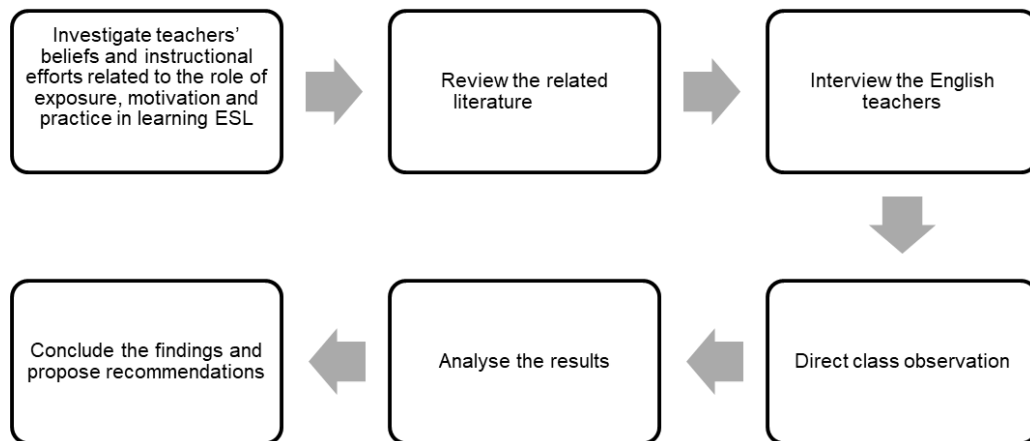


Fig. 1. Research Design Framework.

## 2.2. Participants

This case study involves three female elementary school teachers who teach English at a private elementary school in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. Teacher, I graduated from English Department and have been teaching English to young learners for almost 24 years. At the present, she teaches grades 4, 5, and 6. Teacher II has gone through five years of formal training at a university level majoring in English and has been teaching English to young learners for about four years. At the school, she teaches grades 3 and 5. Teacher III had finished her bachelor's degree majoring in agriculture. She did not have experience in teaching English before finally being assigned to teach English to the second graders starting the academic year when the research was being undertaken. Besides teaching English, the participant teachers are also homeroom teachers in grades 2, 3, and 6 who are given the responsibility to teach all subjects offered for the class and assigned some other responsibilities, like being the class coordinator, extracurricular facilitator, and treasurer in the foundation under which the school is organized. The Table 1 below summarizes the data of the three participants, their teaching hour responsibility, and their usual used methods while teaching English in the classroom.

Table 1. Participant Teachers' Data

	Teachers' Data		
	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Educational background	Bachelor Degree in English	Bachelor Degree in English	Bachelor Degree in Science
Age	46 years old	33 years old	36 years old
Length of teaching experience	25 years	10 years	8 years
Length of English teaching experience	17 years	4 years	Less than 1 year
Homeroom teacher at Grade	6	3	2
Total teaching hour responsibility (@35 minutes)	29 hours	24 hours	24 hours
English teaching hour (@35 minutes)	16 hours	8 hours	6 hours
Other responsibility	Teaching extra lessons for sixth graders	Cooking Club facilitator	Treasurer at the school foundation
Methods used in teaching English	Mind map, doing the workbook, cooperative learning	Mind map, classroom language, TPR, quizzes, songs, games, doing the workbook cooperative learning	Mind map, songs, doing the workbook

## 2.3. Research Setting

This study was administered at a selected elementary school in Malang, East Java, Indonesia—one of the private schools that offer English subjects as a compulsory subject starting from grade 2.

This school which was founded in 2003 has become one of the favorite elementary schools in the municipality and earned predicate 'A' from the National Elementary School Accreditation Board.

Although English was not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum, the school initiated offering the subjects and hired two teachers who graduated from English Department to teach the subject. As the school grew and its classes expanded, the two English teachers could not keep up with the English teaching load. As a result, the school assigned a homeroom teacher to assist with English instruction. Given the circumstances, the current study sought to document the teachers' beliefs and efforts in English classrooms related to promoting students' exposure, motivation, and practice in English, as well as to determine whether their different educational backgrounds and length of experience in teaching English influenced their teaching practices.

## 2.4. Data Collection

This study collected data on teachers' beliefs as well as their instructional efforts to promote conditions in language learning. This was done via the use of teacher interviews and classroom observations.

### 2.4.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews are frequently employed for classroom research (Wragg, 1999). In collecting the data, written questions from the questionnaire modified from Larenaz et al. (2015) and Lin (2008) were given to the interviewees to encourage engagement between the researcher and respondents in natural conversation while having the interview.

The interview that involved two parts concerned the participant teachers' background in the first section and the second addressed their perspective on the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in language learning. The questions were all pre-designed. The focal purpose of the interviews was to discover the teacher's beliefs related to the mentioned conditions in English learning.

The interview was held to understand the teacher's educational background and their beliefs concerning the mentioned conditions in language learning. Besides using the voice recorders, notes were also made to gather data on how the teachers felt about the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in English learning. The participants were allowed to talk openly about how they felt relating to a certain question. The interview with Teacher I took 1 hour 10 minutes and 50 seconds, with Teacher II 25 minutes and 39 seconds, and with Teacher III 14 minutes and 45 seconds. Further information was collected through online messages with three teachers.

### 2.4.2. Classroom Observation

In observations, data are obtained by solely watching the participants teaching English in the classroom. Classroom observation is conducted to understand the participants in their natural environment, without changing or deploying it (Gay et al., 2006). Field notes were used to record the observation results. There were around 25 students in each observed class. Field notes were undertaken to capture all relevant aspects of the situation observed. The aspects consisted of two elementary types of information. They were descriptive information that contained what the observer has precisely seen or heard while teaching and learning activities were being conducted and reflective information that captured the researcher's personal reactions, experiences, and thoughts during the observation session.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the detailed results of teacher interviews and direct classroom observations. A cross-case analysis was employed to summarize and classify the characteristics of the three teachers. Furthermore, as indicated before that three major propositions have been selected to serve as a focus for this study. The following parts present detailed explanations of the participant teachers' beliefs about each of the learning conditions and are followed by the explication of the kind of instructional efforts made by those teachers under each condition.

### 3.1. The Role of Exposure to English

Based on the interview results, it can be stated that the participant teachers are mindful that English should be used during the improvement of their classes and that language learning relies

upon the time students are exposed to English. They also admit that once-a week-class for not more than 70 minutes is considered insufficient for students to be exposed to English. Furthermore, each participant teacher's educational background, English teaching experience, and grade at which they teach do affect their perception and point of view about English learning at the elementary level.

All of the participants admit that their responsibilities as homeroom teachers who should teach other subjects besides English have made them hardly focus on developing materials and providing as much English language exposure to their students. In terms of English skills, they, themselves, feel that their English skills do not improve as they teach very basic English (Yildirim, 2008). While Teacher I whose teaching hour responsibility is the most of all is inquired to prepare the sixth graders for the national examination in which English subject is not included, the other two younger teachers whose teaching hour responsibility is lesser are supposed to develop better materials and design better learning tasks promoting exposure in the English language.

In fact, as both the school and the Regional Education Department provide professional development in the general subject for elementary school teachers, not by the subject they are majoring in, these English teachers undergo a lack of exposure to their own English skill development. Dealing with this, Teacher I initiates taking an English course to enhance her English skills in order to be able to develop both her pedagogical and content knowledge of English. She felt that her language proficiency has weakened to the point that she did not feel comfortable with her speaking. She, then, joined the course twice a week after school hour with the expectation that she could enhance her English skills, progress information, especially about English, and be able to gain new knowledge on English teaching-learning. The updates that she obtained through the course have advanced her English teaching skills and been very useful to be implemented in her class; she does not limit her teaching to what is in the workbook given by the Local Education Department. The use of songs to enrich students' vocabulary and games to introduce topics and materials is a part of the tasks that she has designed to encourage students' use of English skills. This is supported by Ghosn (2019) and Kirkgoz (2019) who suggest that songs, chants, and stories help improve listening and speaking skills. They also assist young learners in gradually internalizing foreign language structures and patterns, as well as learning specific vocabulary items. In addition, as Teacher I teaches the fourth, fifth, and sixth graders who have been exposed to English since they were in the second grade, she always tries to demonstrate to use English in functional communication activities in the classroom and encourage students to bring a dictionary and teaches them how to use it.

Not too different from what has been done by Teacher I, Teacher II who also graduated from English Department, shared that she always implements the classroom language, useful phrases, and expressions in the English language to accustom students to hear. This is supported by Ching & Lin (2019) and Scott & Ytreberg (1990) who posit that the use of classroom language potentially brings benefits to the process of learning language since pupils are encouraged to learn to communicate using simple, meaningful expressions in the target language. Here, Teacher II is aware that using as much of the target language as possible is a part of second language teachers' responsibilities. In addition, as the materials and exercises provided in the students' workbook are considered not enough to enhance students' communicative English skills, she, therefore, has designed various activities in her class, such as mind mapping the topic learn to brainstorm the students, applying Total Physical Responses (TPR) approach, conducting both written and oral quizzes to evaluate students' comprehension and improve their confidence, creating songs, and applying cooperative learning to develop social interaction among peers. In addition, she considers that sometimes it is required for the students to see and listen to how English is spoken and used by the natives. Since it is not easy to have native speakers in the classroom, she instigates appropriate related-topic videos of native speakers to be exposed to the students. It is in line with what Donaghy (2014) writes on the BBC site that films, TV shows, as well as videos, are an essential part of students' lives so it makes impeccable sense to bring them into the language classroom. Besides making the language learning process more amusing and pleasant, they also offer a source of authentic and wide-ranging language as examples of English used in actual situations outside the classroom, predominantly interactive language—the language of real-life conversation. Through videos and films, students are also exposed to natural languages and the natural flow of speech (Meisani, 2021). In addition, as these students are not living in an English-speaking setting, English films and videos can provide them with this real-life language input.

On the other hand, Teacher III whose major is not English and is assigned to help the other two English teachers to teach English to second graders considers that her English is quite enough for teaching this level. She studies the students' workbooks to improve her English and does not essentially use methods in teaching. The students' workbook is her focus and during the English class, the students are busy doing the exercises in the workbook. Although in some topics she creates songs for the students and sings together in the class, she does not surely expand the teaching-learning activities. She considers that vocabulary building should be done first among others; unfortunately, the tasks designed to expose students to vocabulary are not done meaningfully—vocabulary is not given with the context, within meaningful activities, or students' related experiences. Furthermore, she claims that in the second grade, learners' academic and social backgrounds in English are so limited, it is impossible to use English as a means of instruction and communication. It is a surprising contradiction to know that even though Teacher III does not use the target language, she considers the language as a tool that benefits students' learning.

### 3.2. The Role of Motivation in Learning English

Good teachers are the ones who are aware that they play essential roles as teachers and have the important task of convincing learners that they always have to learn beyond what is taught (Larenaz et al., 2015). Teachers should understand that they are not the central agent in pedagogical practices. Based on Burns & Richards (2009), teachers act as role models, guides, facilitators, prompters, and mediators in the classroom. Dealing with this, all of the participant teachers agree that students need to have motivation both personal and external ones to trigger them to learn English. All of them reported that the students are highly motivated in learning English with them. This is a very good point since it can be said that students, at a very early age, have built personal enthusiasm for learning a second language. From the class observation and field notes, this occurs because of teachers' openness to welcome any of the students' questions, complaints, and sharing. In the class, three of them are very helpful and patient in assisting students' learning.

As the most experienced, Teacher I always help the students to see the useful things in what they learn in English class, especially the sixth graders who are going to secondary school in the upcoming year. She encourages the students to see the value in using English as much as possible to prepare them for the higher level of English at the secondary level. The most interesting part about her belief related to motivation is she believes that every child is unique. For this, when the students get stuck, face difficulties, and do not feel confident with their English, this teacher supports them by convincing them that English is not our language, as we are learning, difficulties and mistakes normally exist. If they feel that they are not good at English, she motivates them by saying that they must be good in other subjects, and that is fine. She said that these words work a lot to trigger and induce the students to be positively interested in learning English.

Teacher II motivates the students by demonstrating to the students that they can benefit much from being proficient in English. She enthusiastically uses English as much as possible in the class, provides videos of native speakers to enhance students' listening and speaking skills, and designs interesting tasks to attract students' engagement in class activities. It is also very interesting to know from the interview that Teacher II has identified students in her classes who are highly motivated are the ones whose parents are actively involved in learning. This positively correlates with Meisani (2018) and Setiasih (2012) who state that not only school and educational facilities, but parents' support also determines the success of students' English literacy.

On the contrary, Teacher III, who is not truly experienced in teaching English, does not make any momentous efforts related to motivation in learning English. In general, she believes that the students are fully engaged and interested in studying English with her, even they always look forward to having the English subject that is taught once a week. She considers that this is because English is a new subject for the second graders; they did not have it in the former grade.

### 3.3. The Role of Practice Using English

Practice is extremely important for learning English. The point is teacher should provide the opportunity for the students to practice what they have learned in learning English. Similar to the previous conditions, all of the participant teachers agree that the role of practice is major. In terms of the actions, all of them reported that they assign students to do the exercises in the workbook that can be done both in and outside the classroom during the English subject or after school. Furthermore, through songs, games, and other cooperative learning activities they design, students

are given opportunities to speak, listen, read and write in English. Although most of the students at the elementary level need guidance from their teachers, students should still be given space to practice and appreciated for any efforts they make in learning the language.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This present case study has discussed the results of the research focusing on investigating elementary school teachers of English about the role of exposure, motivation, and practice in ESL learning. Based on the data presented and analyzed in the previous sections, the conclusions are formulated as follows.

Although this study involved only three Indonesian teachers of English at a selected private elementary school and the results are not obviously generalizable, they are valuable to other teachers in the sense that each individual ESL teacher has a teaching approach; each individual ESL teacher acts out her beliefs in the classroom and each individual is by some means involved in change as the language curriculum proposes innovations to apply.

In terms of belief, the three participant teachers provide support to the theoretical propositions made by Spolsky (1989) especially those related to exposure, motivation, and practice. They are aware that the role of exposure is essential in learning a second language, motivation is a vital factor to achieve the objective of the learning and practice is a central part of proficiency development. Consistent with this, regardless of their different educational background and their length of experience in teaching English, three of them have made a great deal of effort to compensate for the number of boundaries they face in their own instructional situations. Although many believe that early language learners do not understand the purpose of learning English, the participant teachers seem to feel a strong sense of concern to motivate students, which may refer to their willingness to expend a good deal of energy in planning and teaching a range of activities in the classroom. In the classes which were observed, teachers worked very hard in preparing the lesson before the class and ensuring the lesson was well-organized, engaging, and intensive. Besides that, the classroom language which is applied by the teacher is advantageous to provide students with simple and meaningful expressions in English. Designing tasks and activities to create opportunities for students to use English at their level and providing continuous supports in various forms by understanding that their students are early English learners therefore they need to ensure that every one of them learns interestedly and meaningfully are also other important efforts made by the teachers.

It is also necessary to know that the literature on teaching English to young learners has identified a number of unyielding encounters. The case in this school where the research was conducted is that English is introduced as a compulsory subject without due consideration of who will teach it. The overwhelming duties have made the school assign a mathematics teacher (Teacher III) to help the two English teachers teach English. As a result, as a severe deficiency of trained teachers of English, the mathematics teacher did not teach the language meaningfully like the other two. As professional development to enhance teachers who teach English is not supported, the teachers may find themselves teaching English either without sufficient preparation in teaching young learners, specifically in teaching English to young learners (Meisani et al., 2020a, 2020b). Nevertheless, it is good to see what has been done by Teacher I and Teacher II dealing with the development of English proficiency and teaching skills. It is their own willingness and awareness to see the importance of improving both their pedagogical and content knowledge of English that indirectly brings advantages to enhance what they can do in their English class with the students.

Hence, it is obvious that the efficient reflection of the association between beliefs and practices can help teachers cultivate an understanding of both what they want to do in their classrooms and the changes they want to apply to their approaches to teaching and learning (Farrell & Bennis, 2013). Due to the limited scope and coverage of the present study, it is suggested that future researchers conduct a further study involving both teachers and students to capture teachers' inner workings of instructional decision-making and students' language learning processes. In-depth interviews with both teachers and students might also be conducted to uncover the motives and reasons behind both their observable and covert decision-making activities during the class.



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