

## **‘Vicarious’ Interaction in Efl Online Discussions: A Classroom Research**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this talk, I will summarise my main learning moments from a classroom research into the quality of my undergraduate students' (n=50) participation in online platform discussions. I set up a Google Group as a non-compulsory e-component to my EFL course. This platform was envisaged as an opportunity for my students to alternatively contribute to the course by starting threads on topics of their interest or by commenting on existing threads. What caught my attention after observing their e-exchanges for a full academic year (2011/12) was that some students--albeit active in class--mostly stayed away from online activity. Others mysteriously disappeared from this online forum half way through the course. I was curious to explore the reasons for this, at times, strange (e-) behaviour among my students.

I engaged in both first- and second-order research (Marton in Freeman, 1998), as I was keen on investigating both the quality of my students' exchanges and their perceptions of, and speculations about, their own behaviours. This classroom research shed local light on a global phenomenon: 'vicarious interaction', i.e. observing the interaction between other participants without taking active part in it (Sutton, 2000). Some of my students' feedback supported Sutton's claim that "direct interaction is not necessary for all students" (p. 3) and that some might learn best via long periods of observation before actually joining the group at a visible level (if they join the group at all). Sutton strongly argues that participants should be given control over how they interact with other participants, to what extent and whether they interact at all.

This realisation has changed the way I perceive face-to-face interaction in class, too (not only online interaction), and has the potential to carry implications for any teaching context, teacher training contexts included.