Symbolic Interaction between Teachers and Students in Fostering Effective Classroom Learning

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the concept of symbolic interaction between teachers and students in the classroom learning process. The meaning of symbols in the context of education plays an important role in forming harmonious social relationships, increasing learning motivation, and strengthening students' self-identity. Teachers are seen not only as conveyors of knowledge, but also as social actors who create symbolic meanings that influence students' behavior and perceptions of the learning process. Symbolic interaction in the classroom occurs not only through verbal communication but also through nonverbal symbols, emphasizing the important role of technology and digital media in changing patterns of symbolic interaction in modern classrooms that present new symbols such as emojis, visual icons, and other forms of digital representation that also influence social meaning in learning. The study was conducted through an analysis of classical and contemporary literature relevant to symbolic interactionism theory, particularly the works of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, using a qualitative approach and library research methods. The main focus of this study is to analyze how symbols, meanings, and social communication processes between teachers and students contribute to the formation of meaningful learning experiences. The implications of this study can form the basis for the development of symbolic communication-based learning strategies that are adaptive to current social and educational technology changes. Overall, this study emphasizes that understanding symbolic interactions in learning is key to building effective, participatory, and humanistic educational communication.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in improving the quality of human resources because it creates an environment that enables students' talents, interests, and abilities to develop optimally (Engkizar et al., 2025; Kalyani, 2024; Yusuf, 2024). The educational process within the school setting involves complex social interactions among teachers, students, and peers, all of whom contribute to shaping learning experiences (Asril et al., 2018; Weyns et al., 2021). Social interaction occurs in relationships between individuals when the actions of one person influence, modify,

actions of one person influence, modify, or enhance the actions of another. Research shows that through meaningful social interaction, students learn to adapt, cooperate, and internalize classroom norms (Haerudin & Noor, 2022; Muspiroh, 2016). Social interaction is closely tied to communication, which involves giving meaning to the behavior, expressions, and emotions of others. Effective communication supported by empathy enables individuals to interpret and respond to social cues accurately (Masdul, 2018). Furthermore, empirical studies have demonstrated that positive social interaction significantly influences students' academic development and learning outcomes (Koranteng et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2023). Through these interactions, students also construct their self-concept, as their experiences with others help them evaluate and understand themselves.

Symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical lens for examining how individuals interpret symbols and construct meaning within social interaction. This perspective highlights that communication consists of verbal and nonverbal symbols, including gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and intonation, which acquire shared meanings among participants and influence subsequent behavior. Recent studies emphasize that such symbolic processes are essential in classroom communication, as students and teachers continuously negotiate meaning through symbolic exchanges that shape learning experiences (Eden et al., 2024; Lia & Sari, 2021). Within diverse and multi-ethnic societies, the presence and interpretation of symbols become even more significant in facilitating understanding and reducing miscommunication.

Contemporary research also reinforces that symbolic interaction forms the basis through which individuals construct a shared symbolic world, interpret social realities, and develop social relationships (Ellis et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2014). In the context of classroom learning, symbolic interaction plays a central role in shaping students' engagement and participation. Teachers and students continuously interpret each other's actions, intentions, and emotional expressions, which then influence how learning activities unfold. Effective learning occurs when teachers are able to construct shared meanings with students through clear communication, supportive gestures, and culturally responsive interactions (Buchari, 2018; Hussin & Tamuri, 2019; Schwarz, 2009).

Studies indicate that the more students perceive teachers' symbolic cues as positive such as encouraging expressions, constructive feedback, and affirming language the more motivated and confident they become in participating in classroom tasks (Alvunger, 2018; Cojorn & Sonsupap, 2024; Rafi & Pourdana, 2023). This process illustrates that learning is not merely the transmission of information but also the negotiation of meaning through symbolic exchanges. As a result, the classroom becomes a social space where symbols mediate understanding, cooperation, and the development of academic competence (Bali & Fadilah, 2019; Kotorov et al., 2020). Recent research also highlights the importance of symbolic interaction in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. In diverse classrooms, students come with different social backgrounds, cultural symbols, and communication patterns, which may influence how they interpret messages from teachers and peers.

Therefore, teachers must develop symbolic sensitivity an awareness of how symbols, gestures, and communication styles may be differently understood by students from various backgrounds (Babullah, 2022; Hasanah & Himami, 2021; Nilson & Zimmerman, 2023). When teachers successfully recognize and accommodate these differences, students feel more respected and understood, which strengthens classroom relationships and enhances learning effectiveness (Busthomi & Wahyuni, 2024; Gudza et al., 2021; Gunawan et al., 2019). This aligns with contemporary educational perspectives emphasizing that meaningful learning occurs

through social processes that involve shared interpretation, mutual respect, and continuous interaction. Thus, symbolic interaction serves not only as a theoretical lens but also as a practical foundation for promoting equitable, engaging, and student-centered learning.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a content analysis approach. The data in this study consist of primary and secondary sources obtained through library research (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Langputeh et al., 2023; Mayring, 2015; Renz et al., 2018). Data collection was conducted by examining relevant literature, focusing on the completeness, clarity, and consistency of information across sources. The collected data were then organized systematically according to themes, sub-themes, or categories relevant to the research topic. The content analysis involved a thorough examination of the texts to identify patterns, recurring themes, and conceptual frameworks. This process allowed the researcher to interpret meanings, compare findings across sources, and draw conclusions that answer the research questions (Engkizar et al., 2023, 2024; Listyaningsih et al., 2023). Through this approach, the study provides a structured and in-depth understanding of the topic based on existing literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Social interaction and psychological development

Social interaction is a fundamental requirement for psychological growth. If this requirement is not met, students' psychological development may be hindered (Balqis et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025; Snow & Matthews, 2016). One crucial aspect of students' psychological development is the formation of their self-concept. Therefore, social interaction is essential to maximize students' development. Fitriyani (2020) argues that social interaction within the environment significantly shapes students' self-concept. Experiences derived from social interaction provide students with new perspectives on themselves, influencing their self-concept. Pleasant experiences tend to foster a positive self-concept, while negative experiences may hinder it.

Social interaction in learning offers several benefits for students. It helps develop social skills crucial for everyday life. Through interaction, students learn how to communicate effectively, collaborate in groups, and understand different perspectives. These skills not only support the learning process at school but also become valuable assets in the workplace and in establishing social relationships after completing formal education.

Furthermore, classroom social interaction can motivate students to study harder. When communicating with peers or teachers, students feel more appreciated and are encouraged to actively participate in learning activities. This sense of appreciation is reinforced by support during the learning process, including constructive feedback, which helps students better understand the subject matter. Social interaction also strengthens emotional bonds between teachers and students, as well as among peers (Jaafar et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025). A conducive and warm classroom environment allows students to feel safe in expressing opinions, asking questions, and engaging in discussions. Positive relationships with teachers contribute to building students' self-confidence, which, in turn, enhances their academic performance.

Symbolic interaction theory

This study employs symbolic interaction theory as its theoretical framework. According to George Herbert Mead, the basic concepts of symbolic interaction are mind, self, and society (Settle, 2018). The theory highlights that the interactions

between teachers and students are shaped by how each interprets symbols and how these interpretations influence their self-concepts. Ixfina (2024) states that symbolic interaction theory is based on three premises: (1) humans act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them; (2) these meanings arise from social interactions with others; and (3) meanings are refined through interpretation during social interactions.

In classroom settings, meaning emerges as teachers and students interact, negotiate, and interpret symbols, both verbal and nonverbal. This study aims to explore the meanings formed in the self-concepts of teachers and students through these interactions.

Effectiveness of learning through social interaction

Learning methods that prioritize social interaction have proven more effective in enhancing student understanding. Activities such as group discussions and collaborative learning allow students to share understanding and explain challenging concepts. This collaborative approach promotes deeper learning and helps students absorb information more effectively than conventional, one-way learning methods.

Social interaction also strengthens students' emotional connection to subject matter. Interacting with peers makes topics feel more relevant, improving retention and the ability to apply knowledge in real-life contexts. Additionally, social interaction fosters a sense of responsibility for personal and group learning, encouraging students to prepare thoroughly and engage seriously in discussions.

Student learning behavior is influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors include physiological and psychological aspects such as intelligence, attitudes, talents, interests, and motivation (Febriani et al., 2020; Rasdiany et al., 2022). External factors encompass the social environment, including family and school, and non-social environments, such as the physical conditions of school buildings, homes, and weather. Supportive social interactions with teachers and peers enhance motivation, while a comfortable physical environment promotes focus and engagement. Behavioral changes typically arise through repeated practice or experience (Kalsum et al., 2025; Kassymova et al., 2025).

A holistic educational approach is necessary to support interaction dynamics in learning. This approach integrates communication aspects and aligns learning processes with social interaction, ensuring they complement and influence each other. Student learning behavior is largely shaped by interactions with teachers in the teaching and learning process, often manifested through instructional communication two-way communication aimed at achieving specific educational goals. According to Herdiansyah et al (2024), learning achievement reflects an individual's effort and understanding of subject matter.

Knowledge, a key indicator of behavioral change, significantly affects student achievement. The deeper students' understanding, the higher their academic performance is likely to be. Formal education shapes not only academic knowledge but also students' understanding of societal roles. Sociology, for instance, examines social life aspects such as individual behavior, group dynamics, and social relationships (Fine, 2012). Understanding social dynamics enables students to apply knowledge effectively in various contexts, integrate academic insights with everyday life, and develop analytical skills.

Effective teacher communication plays a central role in promoting student engagement. Teachers who convey messages clearly and build strong interpersonal relationships create a conducive learning environment. With proper communication, students feel supported and motivated to achieve their learning objectives.

Teacher-student interaction

Symbols are formed through interactions using language a system of verbal and nonverbal symbols expressing shared thoughts and feelings. Significant symbols

evoke common understanding among participants (Albshkar et al., 2025; Eltoukhi et al., 2025; Rambe et al., 2025). In school, verbal symbols include classroom discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and feedback, while nonverbal symbols encompass gestures, body language, classroom routines, prayer, greetings, uniforms, and other habitual actions.

Nonverbal symbols are interpreted alongside verbal symbols, shaping students' attitudes and behavior. These symbols influence teacher-student relationships, allowing teachers to identify student difficulties more effectively. Beyond academics, teachers and students often share personal experiences, further strengthening interpersonal bonds.

Individual actions are understood not only as responses to external stimuli but also as results of interpreting and defining symbols. Through *role-taking*, individuals adopt perspectives in interactions, influencing their thoughts, self-concept, and behavior. For instance, students may adopt teachers' views to motivate personal improvement, while teachers may empathize with less capable students to appreciate their own advantages. Continuous negotiation and adaptation to social interactions shape human behavior, assumptions, and perspectives (Elbadiansyah, 2025).

Establishing positive teacher-student relationships facilitates the teaching of values, character, and moral education. Moral guidance is more effectively imparted through close relationships and interactive engagement rather than direct instruction alone.

Meaning and self-concept

Meaning and self-concept are intertwined with symbols, social interaction, and human relationships. Symbols are interpreted in light of self-concept, guiding behavior in social contexts. Through *looking-glass self*-mechanisms, individuals form self-assessments based on how they perceive others' views (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018). In addition, the *Pygmalion effect* illustrates how expectations from significant others influence self-concept.

Humans function as both subjects (*I*) and objects (*Me*) of themselves. *I* represents spontaneity and creativity, while "me" is reflective and socially sensitive. Interactions between "*I, Me*," and perceptions of generalized and particular others shape individual meaning and self-concept, influencing attitudes and behaviors. Through classroom interactions, teachers and students co-construct meaning, resulting in observable changes in students' behaviors, character, and personalities. Teachers also experience self-improvement through these interactions.

Teacher-student communication

Communication is a social event that occurs when humans interact. Hanafiah et al (2022) define communication as "the process by which an individual (the communicator) transmits stimuli (usually verbal) to modify the behavior of other individuals (the audience)." Verbal communication should provide meaningful stimuli in interactions. Effective communication facilitates learning, symbol exchange, and self-adjustment processes such as socialization, role-playing, identification, and projection.

Effective teacher communication involves two-way interaction with students, promoting active engagement. Teachers provide stimuli to help students explore and discover learning meanings. A sense of collective belonging and membership fosters acceptance, self-esteem, and participation (Rizapoor et al., 2023; Suprianto et al., 2023).

Teachers can encourage active learning by asking questions, appreciating responses, and avoiding negative feedback. Effective communication builds understanding, pleasure, attitude influence, strong interpersonal relationships, and encourages concrete actions in students. These elements ensure that norms and

values are internalized and applied in real life, resulting in a supportive and engaging classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

Social interaction is fundamental to students' psychological development, self-concept, and character formation, as it provides both academic and socio-emotional learning experiences. Positive interactions foster a constructive self-concept, while negative experiences may hinder it. In learning, social interaction enhances engagement, collaboration, and perspective-taking, making students more active, motivated, and responsible. Based on Mead's symbolic interaction theory and Blumer's concepts, meaning and self-concept are shaped through verbal and nonverbal symbolic exchanges, with role-taking and Cooley's *looking glass self*-explaining how individuals assess themselves through others' views. Effective teacher-student communication, being dialogical and participatory, not only conveys knowledge but also fosters motivation, positive attitudes, and interpersonal bonds, creating a sense of belonging that supports learning and behavior development. Thus, social interaction, communication, and symbolic exchange form the core of holistic learning, simultaneously building knowledge, morals, character, and self-concept to support optimal student development.

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