

WHEN IT OFTEN TURNS TO SILENCE: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON ASKING QUESTIONS IN ONLINE ENGLISH CLASS AT UNIVERSITY

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This study aims at investigating the students' perceptions on asking questions in online English class at university which often turns to silence. It focuses on three issues: (1) the factors that encourage the students to ask questions;(2) the factors that burden the students to ask questions; and (3) the lecturers' feedback in question and answer session. This study employed mixed-method approach by using both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis involving 43 students of English letters in a state Islamic university in Central Java. The results reported that the students' interest in the subjects, the lecturers' attitude, and lack of understanding of the learning materials were the key factors that encouraged the students to ask questions. Several factors identified as the burden in asking questions were being afraid of making mistakes in delivering the questions in English, unsureness understanding of the learning materials, limited interaction, and being afraid of asking silly questions. The students reported that generally the lecturers gave satisfying answers to their questions and they argued that they needed more examples or quizzes from the lecturers to deepen their understanding of the learning materials when there was no questions from the students.

Keywords: *Asking Questions, Online English Class, Classroom Interaction*

1. Introduction

Having a communicative class in which teachers and students engage well in the teaching and learning activities is an ideal condition every teacher may hope for. However, in some cases, that condition does not occur as it is expected. Teachers tend to teach in one-way communication by explaining the learning materials to the students, whereas students are listening to the explanation without many interruptions and interactions. As for the question and answer activity in the classroom, surprisingly it has been recorded that teachers often dominated the interaction in class by asking 400 questions in average each day. The questions mostly required low level of critical thinking [1]. Students' feedbacks are usually in the form of agreement that they have already understood the materials or simply answering the questions based on their understanding when they are asked to do so. Students-teachers interaction also can be in the form of questions by which students could confirm their understanding or ask for more explanation or examples. However, students are not always interested in asking questions when they are supposed to, as in question and answer sessions. It often causes silence in question and answer sessions which usually take place after the teachers finish delivering the learning materials or in the middle of delivering explanation .

Asking questions is a prominent aspect in learning processes. It can help students manage their learning experience by merging their prior knowledge and new information to obtain the new ideas on



the subjects. Students' questions are also important to bring up their learning motivation and meaningful learning experience. It also can reveal the quality of students' conceptual understanding, their confusion about the concepts, and what they want to explore. Students' questions at the higher cognitive level contributes to problem solving ability. It also can reflect the students' achievement in the course. Low-level questions as well as lower ability in explaining are correlated to lower achievement [2]. Dealing with the classroom interaction and communication practice, asking question also contributes in developing the students' communicative competence[3].

Despite the importance of question and answer session to reflect the students' progress, many students show less participation in this session and it occurred at different educational levels and contexts [1]. There are several factors that might influence the students' willingness to participate in question and answer session, among others fear of negative evaluation, or students' sense of dread associated with being unfavorably evaluated[4]. In English courses in which English is as foreign language, anxiety of making mistakes in using the language also contributes to students' less participation in question and answer session[5]. There are several factors that are related to the kind and number of questions students ask. Those factors are students' prior knowledge, skills and experiences, social interaction patterns, age, the teacher's attitude, teaching style, classroom evaluative climate, nature of the topics, and time for asking questions [1], [5]. Therefore, it can be seen that the success of question and answer sessions involved two mutual sides of teachers and students' [6].

The emerging issues on online or distant learning due to Covid-19 outbreak also became a concern in classroom activities which were changed from offline or face-to-face meeting the classroom to online class using learning management system or virtual meeting. The question and answer sessions on online platform may have different characteristic from offline ones. The motivation and attitude of teachers teaching in offline learning environment might determine how students interpret the questions[7]. Thus, students might be more motivated to answer the questions. Despite this positive helpful factor for answering questions, not all students are willing to take part in asking questions.

The use of online questions is considered as an effective tool to solicit answers, comments, and feedback from remotely-located students during the distance learning [7]. The kind of online questions are mostly text-based, such as iClicker, Kahoot!, Mentimeter, Poll Everywhere, REEF Polling, Top Hat through which students are invited to give their responses. These online question models do not require the students to perform to directly speak to the audiences. Once again, it has not been proved to contribute in helping the students to solicit their idea by asking questions in the classroom.

Many educators have concerned on the urgency of students' questions in classroom teaching and learning activities. Several studies were looking for ways to help students generate questions. Wang and Roopchund (2015) studied English-speaking anxiety in asking questions as experienced by Chinese students in the MSc TESOL program. Several factors are found as the sources of anxiety, namely personal and interpersonal anxiety, role of instructors, learner beliefs about English language learning, students' educational and cultural background, students' personality, and time for asking questions. The students did several strategies to solve the anxiety by having better preparation, peer seeking, self-encouragement, practice, relaxation, and ignoring others' negative evaluations[5].

Nadile (2021) conducted a study on undergraduates' perceptions of voluntarily asking and answering questions in front of large-enrollment science classes. It revealed the students' belief on voluntarily asking and answering questions as done by other students is very helpful to their learning. In contrary, more than half of students stated that they never ask or answer questions during a semester in large-enrollment college science courses. It is such a contradiction that despite knowing the benefits of something, they tend to be reluctant in giving their contribution^[4]. Dogan and Yucel-Toy (2021) studied students' question asking

process based on elementary school students and teachers' perceptions. The results found that students tended to ask questions when want to learn the topic or being curious about the topic. This study also revealed several factors that became the obstacles for the students to ask questions. Those factors were the teachers attitudes of being uncomfortable or nervous, not responding, ignoring them, and classmates' reactions such as humiliating, making fun of, and not listening to their questions[8]. Looking back at the previous studies on this topic, there was no study so far which discuss the students' perceptions on asking questions in online learning context using foreign language as the medium of teaching and learning activities.

This study investigates the students' perceptions on asking questions in online English class covering several aspects, namely: (1) factors that encourage the students to ask questions; (2) factors that burden the students to ask questions; and (3) the lecturer's feedback in question and answer session. Online English class has several characteristics which make it different from offline classes such as the interaction of the teachers and the students, the media applied, and technical factors that contributes to the implementation of online English class. This study takes the context of virtual meeting class which enable the students and the lecturers to communicate in both spoken and written forms. The novelty of this study lies on its' learning environment which is conducted online through virtual meeting and the subjects who join full online learning at university due to the pandemic situation. This study is beneficial for students and lecturers to recognize the factors that cause the students not actively involved in the question and answer sessions. As for the students this study could be a kind of reflection of what they experience in English classes thus they could manage for some improvement of their capability and activeness in joining online English class at university.

2. Method

This study employed a mixed-method approach by using both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. Quantitative data revealed the information in numbers and were presented in tables and diagrams, whereas qualitative data presented the information in words. This mixed-method was selected to investigate this phenomenon to achieve more comprehensive insights. The participants were 43 university students (S1-S43) majoring in English letters at a state Islamic university in Central Java, Indonesia, consisting of 36 female and 7 male students aged 16-19 years old. All the participants enrolled at the university during the pandemic, in 2021. They joined the university course fully online during one semester. They volunteered to become the participants in this study.

The participants were requested to give responses to a questionnaire (QUE) including a list of questions regarding their practices and perceptions of asking questions and the lecturers' feedback during their enrolment in online classes for one semester. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, namely the participants' personal information, checklist of their practices in asking questions during online learning, and open-ended questions of their perceptions on asking questions during online learning. As a follow-up, 4 of the 43 participants were involved in a semistructured interview (INT), namely S5, S9, S14, and S24. They were chosen randomly and they confirmed their willingness to join the interview. The interview was conducted online using Whatsapp application and they answered the question in written form. The participants were asked to share and explain in detail their practices and perceptions of asking questions and the lecturers' feedback in online English class. Moreover, the participants were also guided to reflect on the reasons that derived the their perceptions.

3. Results and Discussion



This section presents several the findings regarding the students' perceptions on several factors that encourage the students to ask question in online English class, factors that burden the students to ask questions, and the lecturers' feedback in answering the students' questions. Discussion of the findings based on the results of previous studies or the existing theories is also presented. Quotes on prominent findings or commentaries, the results of the questionnaire in forms of table and figure are also provided.

3.1 Factors that encourage the students to ask questions

Among 43 students, 4 students reported that they often asked questions, 36 students reported that they sometimes asked questions, and 3 students never asked questions during online learning courses in one semester. It is known that the students had average participation in asking question during the online learning. Based on the data analysis, the factors that motivate the students to ask questions are students' interest in the subjects, the lecturers' attitude, and lack of understanding of the learning materials.

Among several subjects in English letters, there are three major subjects in which students are more motivated to ask questions, namely speaking, pronunciation, and basic grammar. There are several reasons that encouraged the students to ask questions in these subjects as reflected in the following statements.

“Pronouncuation, because I like how Mrs.Wina explain the answer to me.” (S4, QUE)

“Speaking and basic grammar. Because I like these subjects but sometimes I don't understand the materials.” (S17, QUE)

“Speaking, because the lecturer is nice to talk to.” (S41,QUE)

“Well, speaking and basic grammar made me ask questions. Because speaking is the main skill in English and it needs deep understanding even though I don't ask questions really often because the lecturer is really good in explaining the materials. Meanwhile, basic grammar is a kind of difficult subject for me. Therefore, I often ask questions in basic grammar.” (S42, QUE)

These subjects have similar characteristic of requiring drilling and practice to be able to speak fluently and pronounce English words correctly. In these subjects the students tend to be more motivated to ask questions. The notion of speaking subjects must require two-ways communication, therefore asking question is an element that must present in this subject. In other words, the students' activeness in asking questions in speaking class is supported by its nature.

Pronunciation also requires drilling. They need to confirm the correctness of their pronunciation as well as confirming the pronunciation of the similar words. The same way for grammar, this subject also requires drilling by creating grammatical sentences. These findings confirm the previous studies that students' willingness to ask questions in influenced by the nature of the subjects^[1]. The nature of the subjects found in this study is drilling-required subjects.

The students' responses also point out the lecturers' attitude as another factor that motivates the students to ask questions. The students perceived that they are encouraged to ask questions to the lecturers who are nice and close to the students. It is supported by the following statement.

“In speaking and pronunciation, the lecturers are not like teaching the students. I can say the relationship is like friends who are chatting and it makes me easier to grasp the learning materials.” (S8, QUE)



Meanwhile, asking to female lecturers are more preferred than male lecturers. Among 43 students, 35 students preferred asking to female lecturers and the rest chose male lecturers better. Several factors may influence this choice as reflected in the following statement.

“I think female lecturers will give clearer answer and they are generally more friendly. Meanwhile, asking to male lecturers, I am afraid of getting short answer and I don’t feel comfortable.” (S14, INT)

This finding also confirms the previous study that unpleasant attitude of the lecturers/instructors could become an obstacles in asking questions[8]. Therefore, lecturers who have nice attitude toward the students invites the students to actively ask questions in the class.

The last factor identified to motivate the students to ask questions is lack of understanding of the learning materials as reflected in the several statements above. The following table summarizes the students’ motivation to ask questions dealing with their understanding of the learning materials. The students are allowed to choose more than 1 statement.

Table 1. Students’ motivation in asking questions

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
I want to confirm my understanding	23
I want my lecturers to repeat his/her explanation because I don't quite understand	22
I want an explanation about my findings/ certain phenomena related to the materials	8
I want more examples	20
I want to know my lecturers' opinion about certain phenomena	2
Sometimes I ask things that are off of the topic	1

Most common questions of this last factor is motivated by the students’ necessity to confirm their understanding, ask the lecturers to repeat the explanation, and ask the lecturers to give more examples. This finding also confirms previous studies that the students tend to ask when they want to know something or being curious[8]. This study revealed in detail what kind of curiosity the students’ feel. It could be translated as the students’ need to confirm their understanding, ask for repetition for the explanation, and ask for more examples.

3.2 Factors that burden the students to ask questions

Other than the factors that motivate the students to ask questions, there are also some factors that cause students’ inactiveness in asking questions. Table 2 below shows several reasons that make the students reluctant in asking questions. Afraid of making mistakes in delivering the questions in English becomes the key factors that burden the students. The second key factor is the confusedness about what to ask because the students don’t really understand the materials. In addition, they are also afraid of making silly questions. Several aspects cause those factors coming up as the burden in asking question as reported in the following statements.

The following table shows the reasons the students chose not to ask questions. The students are allowed to choose more than one reason.

Table 2. Students’ reason of not asking questions in online English class



<i>Statements</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
I am afraid of asking silly questions	14
I am afraid of making mistakes when delivering my questions in English	22
I don't know what to ask because I don't really understand the materials	21
I don't understand the materials at all	3
I have understood all of the explanation	9
I am afraid my lecturer will get angry	4
My friends may think I only want to get the lecturer's attention by asking questions	4

The students' reasons to avoid asking questions were also reflected from the questionnaire as can be seen in the following statements.

"I don't really often ask something with any lecture, I often ask friends who understand the material. I'm to afraid of my English skill is not good when I'm talking with lecturer" (S40, QUE)

"Actually, I don't really "want" to interact too much, I mean by asking the lecturer when the material or learning is in progress because I am quite shy and introverted. however, I am aware that being active in the classroom is one of the supporters of the value of learning. but when I wanted to ask a question too, I was a little insecure because honestly, I thought that my question was not as meaningful as my other friend's question or because when I wanted to ask, it turned out that the question had already been asked by another friend of mine. I'm not too sure what subject I'm in the mood to ask, but if I wanted to know something I definitely would ask it." (S25, QUE)

The students' burden in speaking English and insecurity of asking silly questions should become a concern of the lecturers, moreover in an English major class. The lecturers' awareness of the students' anxiety would likely influence their attitudes toward the students' questions by giving appropriate feedback that can be easily understood by the students. Additionally, the lecturers also needed to improve their classroom discourse competence to use the questions more functionally for student involvement in classroom interaction.

Due to their unreadiness in speaking English, the students prefer to deliver their questions in written form by writing it on the chat box available on the virtual meeting platforms. As many as 60.5% of the students prefer writing the question, while the rest chose to speak directly to the lecturers

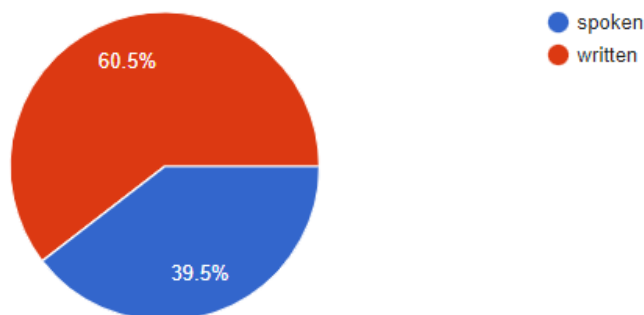


Figure 1. Students' preference in asking questions

Asking through chat comes as the solution for their unreadiness in speaking English because it enables them to arrange the sentence as well as revise it to make it correct and understandable.

“I think students will be more comfortable asking indirectly/written system because it is easier to express and guess whether the question is easy to understand. On the other hand, if students ask questions directly, they are worried that they will not be able to organize the language well, so that the listeners can understand them. Not to mention if the student is nervous or nervous.” (S14, INT)

The students' responses also indicated their lack of confidence speaking English, getting nervous, and afraid of being wrong and feeling ashamed. It confirms the previous study of students' reluctant to speak English in classroom context^[5]. Meanwhile, those who preferred asking question by speaking directly argued several reasons: (1) speaking could deliver the question clearer with intonation; (2) speaking is more concise and can be revised immediately, (3) speaking could build up the classroom interaction among the students and the lecturer, and (4) speaking motivates them to learn more.

Other factor that cause reluctancy is asking questions is the limited interaction among the students and the lecturers. The respondents of this study were enrolled in the university during the pandemic thus they never met the classmates and the lecturers in face-to-face offline interaction. It also contributes to the students' unreadiness to get involved in the classroom discussion as reflected in the following statement.

“In the end we are more reluctant to ask directly because of the lack of interaction between fellow students or lecturers, because if you ask in writing it can still be justified and can still be thought about but directly, I think students are still nervous because they are afraid that there will be words that offend and are uncomfortable.” (S9, INT)

The limited interaction in online class do not enable the class members to really close personally, thus it results in their unreadiness to join the online class interaction. It is in line with previous studies which stated that online class has lower sense of presence and higher sense of anonymity. While it could encourage the students' participation in some learning activities which enabled them to respond anonymously, it didn't work for verbal interaction since the members of the class didn't really know each other. Therefore, it results in the students' hesitation to contribute in the classroom activity, including to ask questions.

3.3 The lecturer's feedback in question and answer session



Lecturers' feedback in answering the students' questions also becomes an important issue in this study. As the students were asked about the answers given by the lecturers, it was revealed that mostly lecturers' feedbacks are satisfying for the students, although the responses of 44% of the responses show inconsistent satisfaction and it tends to be a considerable number.

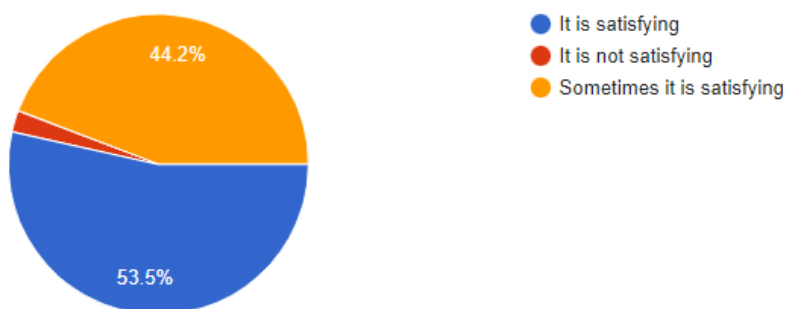


Figure 2. Students' satisfaction of the lecturers' feedback in question and answer session

It is important for lecturers/instructors to provide high quality responses to students's questions that highlight the process of evaluating multiple sources of evidence [9]. Therefore, satisfying answer or response on the students' questions might determine the students' willingness to keep engaged in this session. Other than the satisfaction in providing the answer of the students' questions, the lecturers' attitude also determines the students' willingness to get actively involved in asking questions sessions.

“If the lecturer in learning is comfortable and humble towards students, they will automatically be active in the class. Meanwhile, if there is a lecturer who is known to be a killer and is always serious in learning, it seems that even students will feel afraid or nervous when they want to ask questions.”(S24, INT)

The lack of students' activeness in question and answer session doesn't always represent their understanding of the learning materials and the lecturers may not considered that so. The following table express what the students expect from the lecturers when there is no more question in the classroom.

Table 3. Students' expectation if there is no more question in the class

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
The lecturer ends the class soon	15
The lecturer continues his/her explanation with more examples	18
The lecturer gives some quizzes	6
The lecturer delivers some questions to the students randomly.	3
The lecturer summarizes the learning materials	1

From the table it can be learned that mostly students still want more learning activities to confirm their understanding. Since not all students have an initiative to communicate it to the lecturer, the lecturers need to be aware of the students' condition to decide what to do.

Students need to adapt to their lecturers and their classmates as well. Lecturers play an important role in improving the students' activeness in online learning class as their success in the classroom by building up positive interaction. Some suggested strategies are by initiating communication outside the classroom (for example through Whatsapp group which is widely used), allowing time for students to ask questions, speak slowly and eliminate idioms from examples, share interests and personal information, effectively use class time [10]. Lecturers also can modify the language use in online classroom interaction to optimize learning, including in giving feedback to the students [11]. It is suggested that learner engagement can effectively facilitate increases in satisfaction in synchronous remote learning over the course of a semester^[12].

4. Conclusions

Asking questions is a prominent aspect in learning processes. Some factors might influence students' willingness to engage in asking question in classroom practices. Things get more complicated in the midst of online English learning courses due to the pandemic. This study has revealed factors that encourage the students to ask questions in online English class, factors that burden the students to ask questions, and the lecturer's feedback in answering the students' questions. Students' interest in the subjects, the lecturer's personality, and lack of understanding of the learning materials are the factors that encourage the students to ask questions in online English class. Meanwhile several other factors are identified as the burden in asking questions, namely being afraid of making mistakes in speaking English, unsureness of understanding of the learning materials, limited interaction, and being afraid of asking silly questions. The students reported that generally the lecturers give satisfying answers to their questions and they argue that they need more examples or quizzes to deepen their understanding of the learning materials if there is no question from the students, although many of the students also prefer the lecturers to end the course soon.

This study focuses on the perceptions of first-semester students in asking questions during online English class. This study doesn't take into account the technical problems that might occur during the online learning courses that might influence the students' willingness to ask questions, such as limited device or unstable connection. It also did not investigate the level of students' question, whether it belongs to lower or higher level of critical thinking. Those aspects become the limitedness of this study. Further study may discuss broader issue in classroom interaction during online English learning courses or focusing on students' willingness to participate in classroom interaction among different online learning platforms as well as the quality of the students' questions.

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