



TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF QUESTIONING AS PRE-TEACHING STAGE IN GENERAL ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract:

Research into questioning, a form of inquiry to engage students in active and purposeful responses has witnessed its crucial role in teaching English as a foreign or second language. In particular, questioning, from the Socratic philosophy, is an interactive process that involves student thinking and communication of ideas and knowledge for effective learning. However, teacher questioning has not received much attention in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom context in higher education in Vietnam. Moreover, classroom questioning and teachers' perceptions of this instructional practice facilitating students' higher-order skills in non-English majored classes remained scarce. This study therefore examines such perceived use of questioning within non-English majored classes at tertiary context. This paper focuses on the interview data, which explored how seven teachers perceived their respective use of questioning related to active learning of students in General English classes. The findings reveal how teachers perceived questioning as effective in several ways. The findings extend the literature on questioning strategies by providing insightful views into how teachers used questions to promote active learning of students, tailor their existing practices, and make informed decision-making processes for their future undertakings. The paper concludes by presenting implications for teachers and students for the quality instruction and professional growth.

Keywords: questioning, student learning, active learning, challenges

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on questioning, from a sociocultural perspective, an instructional strategy to provoke student thinking, learning and communicating ideas and knowledge ([Tofade, Elsner, & Haines, 2013](#); [Wilén, 1991](#)). In particular, teachers'

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questions play an indispensable role in encouraging students to express views or opinions or elaborate on their understanding and facilitate their learning process ([Chin, 2007](#); [Long & Sato, 1983b](#)). No discussion on questioning or teachers' questions can be complete without referring to the term 'interaction' by the work of Vygotsky (1978) in English language teaching and learning. As its name suggest, while responding to the questions generated by the teacher, students are likely to share and discuss with others in pair or groups in order to process and then relate new knowledge to background knowledge in active and meaningful ways. However, in Vietnam, there is a paucity of research into this higher order thinking level with particular regard to students' learning English as a foreign language. The current study reported in this paper therefore provides insights from a study which explored how seven teachers perceived the use of the questioning strategy at pre-teaching stage in General English classes within the Vietnamese context for non-English majored students.

In Vietnam, there is a pressing need for improving the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages, including English at all levels of education to meet the needs of learners and this trend puts great demands on university teachers for more active teaching ([Ministry of Education and Training, 2008](#)). However, teaching at tertiary levels is largely based on traditional lecturing ([T. B. T. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018](#); [N. T. Pham, 2010](#)). One way to enhance student learning English as a foreign language is through questioning of text; however, this effective tool still remains scarce in General English teaching and learning contexts. In addition, few studies have been conducted on how teachers perceived questioning at pre-teaching activity as facilitators of student learning. The research reported in this article therefore fills the gap.

2. Literature review

2.1 Teachers' perceptions

The term 'perceptions' is defined in several ways in the literature. Perceptions are defined as individuals' ability to see, hear, become aware of or understand things around us through the use of senses ([Borg, 2015](#); [Richards & Schmidt, 2010](#)). Perceptions refer to the process of experiencing meaning of information ([Eggen & Kauchak, 2001](#)). These views suggest that perceptions are ways teachers think and make sense of information and their decision-making process ([H. G. T. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019](#); [T. C. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020](#)). For the purposes of this study, teachers' perceptions are viewed as teachers' thinking about their actions in order to improve their practices and student learning through questioning.

2.2 Questioning as pre-teaching activity

Questioning (or teachers' questions) is an indispensable part in teachers' practices to get students involved in thinking about and understanding the text ([Paul & Elder, 2007](#); [Peterson & Taylor, 2012](#); [Wilén, 1991](#)). Questioning is rooted in the work of Socrates, a Greek philosopher as it refers to the teacher's activity to promote student thinking and articulation of their opinions or ideas for efficient learning ([Maphosa & Wadesango, 2016](#);

[Seker & Kömür, 2008](#)). It is assumed that from Socratic philosophy, questioning is associated with the idea of making student learning more interesting and engaging ([Fahim, 2012](#)). Other views highlight that teachers' questions are targeted at students' gains, better understanding, participation, and higher-order thinking skills ([Maphosa & Wadesango, 2016](#)). The practice of questioning also allows for stimulating students' prior knowledge, extend thinking out of the box, and building on confidence ([Hill, 2016](#); [Tofade et al., 2013](#); [Yang, 2017](#)). Thus, through questioning teachers can evaluate students' assignments ([Brualdi, 1998](#); [Nappi, 2017](#)) based on the student-centered constructivist approach ([Do & Tran, 2020](#)) instead of traditional lecture mode which only recalls information provided to them. reader's cognitive processes and their prior knowledge. Additionally, questioning as a pre-teaching activity as a top-down processing that involves lesson delivery and directions for students to know what to do to participate and facilitate their learning ([Amalia & Devanti, 2016](#); [Hong & Nguyen, 2019](#)). From the social constructivist learning theory, questioning is therefore important because teachers act as facilitators of student learning and students as active and autonomous participants of new knowledge ([Farrell & Mom, 2015](#)). Given that the nature and value of questioning as a high level cognitive strategy in teaching and learning English as a foreign language ([Davoudi & Sadeghi, 2015](#)), for the purpose of this study, questioning is defined as questions generated by the teacher to promote student thinking, interaction, and participation in processing knowledge of a particular area. This paper therefore adds to the literature on classroom questioning as interactive teaching and learning in non-English majored classes, namely General English contexts.

A study by Pham and Hamid ([2013](#)) examined the relationship between teachers' beliefs about quality questions and their questioning practice regarding questioning purposes and students' cognitive level. Findings show that there was a difference between teachers' beliefs and their practices in four aspects: purposes, content focus, cognitive level, and lexis and syntax. These authors believed that questions in reading lessons were used to check students' memory of the previous lesson, generate students' interests, give students prompts, and promote students' problem-solving skills or abilities. In actual practices, teacher questions were used to double check or give students more clues to the topic.

A study by Tran and Phuong ([2018](#)) explored the impact of questioning and semantic map in pre-reading stage on 52 EFL gifted grade 12 students' reading comprehension within the Vietnamese context. Data collected in their study include tests and interviews. The findings from this study indicate that using students' schema through questioning and semantic map in the pre-reading stage had significant effects on students' reading comprehension.

A case study by Do and Tran ([2020](#)) reported teachers' questioning in English reading classes. Research instruments in the study were audio-recording and classroom observations from three reading classes where a teacher and 30 freshmen of English majors participated. The findings show that audience-oriented and content-oriented questions could involve students in interactive learning with higher level of cognitive competence.

A recent doctoral study by Phan ([2020](#)) examined how teachers and students perceived and used questions to improve teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in tertiary classrooms in a public university, Vietnam. Data collected for this study include interviews with eight teachers, focus groups with eight student groups, and observations of eight classes. The findings reveal that questioning used by teachers and students could enhance language learning through critical thinking and collaborative learning. However, this benefit from questioning mostly depended on the role of the teachers' questioning skills.

These above-mentioned studies have revealed that questioning could yield positive effects on student learning and interaction in their learning process. However, there have been no studies investigating teachers' perceptions of questioning as a pre-teaching activity within the teaching and learning English as a foreign language of non-English majored contexts. This paper therefore fills the gap in the literature on questioning.

3. The study

This exploratory case study utilized a qualitative design ([Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012](#)) to provide insights into teachers' perceptions of the concept 'questioning'. The study reported in this paper attempts to answer the questions: 'What are teachers' perceptions of questioning as a pre-teaching activity in General English classes? and 'How do teachers conceptualize questioning towards student learning?'

Qualitative data from semi-interviews were conducted with seven EFL teachers who taught English to non-English majored students. These teachers of English were teaching in Department of General English and ESP at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. At the time of the study, years of teaching experiences of the teachers varied from 8 to 17 years. Pseudonyms are used to protect teachers' identities.

The interview data discussed in this paper aimed to gain in-depth understanding of the perceptions of seven teachers about how questioning was used in their General English classes. The case studies were deemed appropriate because it utilized rich contextually-based information ([Berg & Lune, 2012](#)) and served as a potential tool for influencing their classroom decisions ([Pajares, 1992](#)) or improving practices ([Yin, 2012](#)). These cases were undertaken during the first-fifteen-week semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. Each interview took approximately one hour. All the interview questions were designed in English and then translated into Vietnamese. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that the participants felt more comfortable and could fully express their ideas clearly and naturally. The interview questions were initially piloted and then organized more logically to avoid any possible bias ([Creswell, 2014](#)).

The interview data were recorded, organized using thematic analysis ([Boyatzis, 1998](#)). This type of analysis allowed for identifying categories or themes, through the following stages: familiarization, classification of themes, and mapping for units of meaning, as noted by Stringer ([2008](#)).

4. Findings

4.1 Insights into teachers' perceptions of questioning as pre-teaching activity

Analysis from the interview data revealed that the seven teachers showed varying perceptions that reflected their understandings of questioning as active learning in English teaching. Three themes of the effectiveness of questioning as a pre-teaching activity the interviewed teachers believed include students' curiosity and attention, their connection between prior knowledge to the new lesson, and better problem-solving ability.

A. Curiosity and attention

Three out of seven teachers admitted that questioning as a pre-teaching activity provoked students to think and engage in the lesson content. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"I think questioning makes students curious about the topic they are about to learn as well as to wake them up. After the activities, they can gain some vocabularies beside their prior knowledge. The time we spent on scaffolding them helps the lesson go on quickly. The visual aids used in the pre-questioning stage have been attracting and fascinating learners." (Teacher 2, interview extract)

"Questions help to attract learners' attention. In fact, in some afternoon classes, students felt tired and sleepy if we asked them to read the text straight away. They kept on yawning... But if we questioned them and required them to discuss on the topic, they could stay focused on the lesson." (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"The benefit of questions, I believed, is to make learners become aware of what they are going to learn." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

The above quotes suggest that these teachers believed that questioning in their classroom practices was related to improvements in English skills, namely vocabulary gains and discussion over a given text.

b. Connection between prior knowledge and the new lesson

Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 revealed that through questioning at the beginning of the lesson, they could assist students in connecting prior knowledge to the new one. They commented:

"As for the topic related to the objects in the house or rooms, I required students to use the structures, 'there is/ are...the room'. They know how to use the preposition 'in' properly to fill in the blank." (Teacher 2, interview extract)

"The benefit offered by pre-questioning is to review previous lessons and connect to the new grammatical structures and vocabularies." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

c. Problem-solving skill

Teacher 4 and Teacher 6 confirmed that questioning could engage students in solving problems for a topic in lesson content. They said:

"Thanks to the questioning activity, both students and the teacher (I) can work on the tasks quickly. Students concentrate on the lesson content as well as show better problem-solving ability." (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"The questioning before the lesson delivery assists me (the teacher) in saving time for other activities or tasks in the while stage. It takes more time and efforts from the teacher to explain or introduce the new terms without pre-questioning." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

Teacher 6 also revealed that this questioning strategy was beneficial to both students and the teacher in ways that students could guess the main idea of a specific text. She said:

"Questions can make students feel glad as they guessed the answer before they read or listen."

4.2 Conceptualization of questioning as a warm-up activity

Two teachers perceived questioning as a warm-up activity during their teaching practices. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"I think questioning is like a warm-up activity available in the course book for each unit. What teachers need to do is just following the pictures attached in the book. For instance, I require students to talk about the assigned picture as well as to complete all the discussion questions. I mainly use the questions and content available in the book." (Teacher 1, interview extract)

In addition, she believed that questioning using pictures from the course book was more interesting than questioning without any visual aids. She explained,

"I think students prefer learning with pictures as they are more colorful and attractive. It is more interesting than answering a list of four or five questions. Pictures are more interesting than a list of questions with words and words. Certain details in the pictures help learners memorize the lesson." (Teacher 1, interview extract)

"As a warm-up activity, questioning, I believe, stimulates learners' curiosity, urge them to have a deep understanding of the lesson. Once they've got positive learning motivations, they become actively engaged in the learning process to obtain what they want to understand a specific field." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

4.3 Conceptualization of questioning as active learning

Five out of the seven teachers perceived questioning was related to active learning and this engagement could provide students with greater opportunities to learn. The following extracts illustrate their views.

"I think questioning refers to any activity designed for students to take part in the learning activities. Definitely, when they get involved, they become active and have more chances to actually use and learn English... and eventually they have more motivation to learn English. Instead of learning from page to page in the course book, it is obvious that the designed activities give learners more motivation and interest to learn." (Teacher 1, interview extract)

"I believe questioning is a type of active learning as it refers to any approach in which learners discover the learning methods and engage in their learning process effectively." (Teacher 2, interview extract).

"I think questioning is a kind of active learning, in particular based on teachers' guidance; students must find out their own ways to maximize their learning effectiveness." (Teacher 3, interview extract).

"Questioning, to me, is somehow related to active learning. It is any approach in which learners find their own ways to obtain new knowledge ... They obtain the knowledge by discovering, absorbing, and processing it to achieve their learning goals." (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"I believe questioning can be active learning because it means that learners plan and answer the questions raised by the teacher to fulfill their assignment, and then become independent of the teacher over time." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

4.4 Challenges of questioning

When asked what teachers thought about the challenges of the use of questioning in General English classes where students were non-English majors, five themes were identified as class size, students' lack of confidence, mixed level classes, students' inactiveness, and their dominance learning style over others.

Teacher 1 claimed that there were three main factors hindering her from making full use of questioning activity. They include large class size, students' lack of confidence and mixed-level classes. She expressed:

"The first and foremost problem is the excessive class size; it is impossible for teachers to let every single student speak out in every class. Secondly, some of the students are still very unconfident about their English so they do not get involved actively. Students with better English proficiency seem to dominate low-achieving ones."

Teacher 1 added:

"The overloaded content of the course demands teachers to complete all the lessons and prevent them from using activities to enhance students' active learning."

Likewise, overloaded content and mixed ability classes hindered the teacher from questioning students in order to warm up the class, as expressed by Teacher 2. This teacher commented,

"The first problem is that obviously the number of units to be covered in this semester is bigger than in the past, which prevents teachers from spending time on warm-up activity... Secondly, some students had quite good English competence, some even forgot basic knowledge like alphabet in the very first weeks of the semester."

While Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 expressed the challenge of dealing with a mixed-ability class, Teacher 3 came up with the problem of questioning posed to low-achieving students. She mentioned:

"Learners in General English classes are at their low level of English competence and often hesitate to answer Wh- questions."

Teacher 5 clarified,

"Mixed-ability classes make low-achieving students shy and have the feeling of being dominated by their peers and even feel lost."

Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 revealed the inactiveness or shyness of many students and the dominance of high-achieving students in class over other peers. For example, Teacher 1 expressed:

"Many students in General English courses seem to be inactive due to their limited English language proficiency. Only some of them are competent or capable of, and often volunteer to answer my questions, whereas the rest of the class decide to keep silent until they are required to talk or told to do so."

Teacher 2 extended her view on this issue:

"Many of them are very shy and seldom volunteer to answer questions."

Teacher 5 held a strong belief that beside class size, what challenged her was the dominance learning style while asking students questions. She said:

"The challenge of questioning is that it cannot reach a large number of students involved. Some active students may dominate their peers and most of the shy students become reluctant to express their ideas or to take the initiation."

Teacher 5 further explained her perspective on that challenge as a result of conventions and time limit.

"It is the learning style of the whole generations influenced by the teaching methods in high school [traditional one]. It takes time to change the students' rigid learning habits [passive]...Due to the time limitation, I think it is rather challenging to spend more time triggering students' curiosity about the topic for the purpose of the warm-up activity that leads in the lesson."

4.5 Potential questioning techniques to involve student active participation

Five teachers believed that students' bonus grades, reduced class size, frequent encouragement, and simple questions (lower-level questions) could be the potential ways that engage student active participation in answering teachers' questions.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 gave their students bonus grades as a way to encourage those who volunteered in their class. For example, Teacher 1 elaborated:

"I often give students bonus marks to motivate them to actively get involved. As for any warm-up activity, any student who voluntarily answers a question will get bonus marks. With this encouragement initiative, students tend to participate in the classroom activities more actively."

Teacher 5 believed that small class size could be a possible way for teachers to manipulate questioning to get students involved in their learning process. Teacher 1 suggested the ideal number of students for each class should be from 30-35 whereas Teacher 2 recommended that the class size should be less than 30.

In addition to reduced number of students in one class, Teacher 2 stated that:

"It is important to notice that teachers should ask the questions that are suitable to the students' level. By doing so, this could encourage students to get involved in the lesson or talk about the lesson content provided to them. I think it is very necessary to give frequently encouragement to low-achieving students."

In the same vein, Teacher 3 paid more attention to inactive students:

"After my instruction for a certain speaking activity, I go around the classroom to observe students' group work. Then, I will ask the most inactive group of students first."

Teacher 4 considered making simple questions as a great solution to facilitate students to answer the questions:

"Most of my questions are quite simple and familiar to students and in case they cannot get what I mean, I provide them with more prompts like pictures or vocabularies and eventually they can answer my questions with ease."

Teachers 1, 3, and 4 asserted that they would continue to use questioning as an active learning strategy to begin their classes in the future.

5. Discussion

Research Question One: What are teachers' perceptions of questioning as pre-teaching activity towards student learning?

Grounded in Socratic philosophy, questioning was found as the potential instructional tool for teachers to promote student thinking and active participation in their learning process. The findings from this study about teachers' self-reports of the use of questioning in this study add to the knowledge of the field. The current study reveals the value of classroom questioning as pre-teaching activity by the teachers who believed that this type of instructional strategy provoked their student thinking and engagement in the content delivery in General English classes for non-English majored students. The findings are in line with other studies by several researchers ([Nappi, 2017](#); [Paul & Elder, 2007](#)). These authors claimed that questioning is an essential element of teaching and learning process associated with enhanced student thinking and quality of instruction.

Regarding its benefits as pre-teaching activity, questioning was believed to arouse students' curiosity and attention, link between background knowledge to the new lesson content, and enhance their problem-solving ability. This concurs with several studies in the literature ([Heritage & Heritage, 2013](#); [Taboada, Bianco, & Bowerman, 2012](#); [Tofade et al., 2013](#)). These authors argue that teaching questioning is the core of instruction in providing students with opportunities to elicit students' existing learning status and move them forward for deeper understanding. Thus, research on the relationship between questioning and student learning has indicated that higher order thinking questions are closely related to increased student understanding of a given topic.

Research Question Two: How do teachers conceptualize questioning towards student learning?

The teachers conceptualized questioning as active learning and warm-up activity during their teaching practices. This finding confirms Long and Sato's ([1983a](#)) claim that teachers' questions lead students to think of what they were going to do and how to do it. This extends the literature on active learning ([Bonwell & Eison, 1991](#)) that students are engaging in doing tasks and thinking about what they are doing. This constructivist view implies that once students are given opportunities to take greater responsibility for and

active participation in doing things, they can move forward their learning and understanding.

However, the teachers claimed some challenges of the use of questioning in their classes, such as class size, students' lack of confidence, mixed level classes, students' inactiveness, and the dominance learning style of high-achieving students. Awareness of such challenges as well as the benefits of questioning on student learning give rise to how teachers reflect on their practices and reconceptualize their roles and continue the positive aspects of this instructional type in other contexts.

6. Conclusions

The findings from this present study provide insights into teachers' perceptions of questioning as a potential tool for facilitating student learning in General English classes. The findings of this study contribute to questioning literature on teaching contexts at tertiary non-English majored classes, particularly in Vietnam as teachers recognized the benefits of questioning as pre-teaching activity to improve student learning. More research is needed to explore the value of questioning in the teaching and learning process in wider contexts to make classroom learning environment or learning space more communicative, engaging and interactive.

Although qualitative study in this study involved only seven teachers and this cannot make the findings generalizable in other similar tertiary contexts, these positive perceptions of the questioning strategy will pave the way for other teachers to undertake research into the complexities of the effects of this instructional tool in line with their beliefs to optimize student learning in different disciplines.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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