

ATTENDANCE QUESTIONS TO ENHANCE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE CLASSES

Kusumarasdyati
Independent Researcher, Indonesia
kusumarasdyati@gmail.com

Abstract

The present action research aimed to overcome the disengagement among EFL student teachers by using attendance questions. The participants included 37 student teachers who attended the *ELT Methods* course in Google Classroom. In the second half of the semester, they responded to attendance questions at the beginning of each session to increase their motivation and improve their engagement in learning. To collect the data, the teacher educator kept reflective journals and conducted participatory observation. The student teachers completed a questionnaire on learner engagement, followed by semi-structured interviews. The results indicated the intervention effectively revived the student teachers' engagement. The improvement occurred in the behavioral, affective, and cognitive areas, but the affective engagement was the most favorably affected. The reasons for the improved engagement from the student teachers' perspectives provided compelling insight into the connection between the attendance questions, motivation, and learner engagement. Based on these findings, the implications for EFL teacher training were presented.

Keywords: Learner engagement, online learning, English as a foreign language, student teachers, attendance questions.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning still holds an important place in higher education during the post-pandemic era due to its benefits, hence the sustainable online language classes. Synchronous and asynchronous classes not only provide the learners the flexibility and convenience of pursuing knowledge with respect to time and location, but also enhance language learning by encouraging the learners to use various applications to improve their knowledge and skills (Andrew, 2019; Haron et al., 2015; Lamy & Hampel, 2007). However, a prevalent challenge pertains to the synchronous classes, namely, learner engagement (Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2014).

This paper reports how the author—a teacher educator in a university—resolved disengagement which EFL student teachers underwent while taking *ELT Methods* course during teacher training. This course was held online in Google Classroom, where they learned various language teaching methods such as Communicative Approach, Audio-lingual Method, and others by presenting these topics in groups. Each group presented a particular teaching method by uploading the paper and the slides in the stream one day before the class began. On the next day, the teacher educator opened the lesson by giving trivia related to language teaching. For example, in a session about the Audio-lingual Method, she posted the pictures of Lado English Series (Lado, 1978) a well-known English textbook used to teach English when this method was thriving. Afterwards, the fellow student teachers asked questions or expressed their opinions about the topic in the comment section under the post, then the presenters responded by

writing their answers. The teacher educator observed disengagement among the student teachers in the online written discussion. Although the attendance rate was high (i.e. they seldom skipped the class in each session), only a few of them participated in the discussion. In addition, the questions they asked only required low-level thinking skills, although the results of the mid-term exam indicated good acquisition of materials. The student teachers seem to be disengaged and reluctant to make optimum use of their knowledge and skills, so the teacher educator attempted to solve this problem by asking attendance questions. Asking the right questions to the student teachers can boost their motivation and reinforce learner engagement (Blaz, 2023), hence this study.

The present study aims to describe: (1) how the teacher educator attempted to improve learner engagement among EFL student teachers by utilizing attendance questions at the beginning of each session, (2) to what extent the attendance questions improve the behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement of the learners, and (3) the reasons for improved engagement as it related to the attendance questions from the student teachers' perspectives. It is essential to review some basic concepts about learner engagement and questioning, and they will be taken up in the next section. The methodology of the study follows, then the results will be reported. The conclusion and the implications will be presented at the end of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner engagement refers to “the heightened, simultaneous experience of concentration, interest, and enjoyment in the task at hand” (Shernoff, 2013). It is energized, directed, and sustained actions taken by the learners due to their motivation to do so (Mercer, 2019). Thus, high motivation drives them to engage more in learning (Barkley, 2010). How they engage can be explained in different models of learner engagement. Halverson & Graham (2019) provided a comprehensive list of such models, but this study categorized learner engagement into behavioral, emotional (affective), and cognitive ones based on the model proposed by Fredricks et al. (2005). Behavioral engagement involves the learners' conduct and participation in activities, emotional engagement is how the learners feel about the activities, and cognitive engagement includes commitment to comprehension, strategy use, persistence, and other relevant traits.

Empirical evidence showed that learner engagement has a positive impact on learning outcomes (Wang et al., 2022), academic performance (Wang & Zhang, 2020), and L2 competence (Carver et al., 2021). It is essential, therefore, for educators to maintain learner engagement in the classroom to ensure successful learning. Disengagement such as lack of class participation, cognitive involvement in learning, and sense of belonging hinders the learners' attempt to achieve satisfactory outcomes (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). When the learners get disengaged, the educators need to take immediate action to rekindle the learners' interest because engagement not only promotes knowledge gain but also predicts the success of learning (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). There are several techniques for increasing learner engagement, but this paper focuses on questioning used to check the student teachers' attendance in a class.

Stewart & Cash (2017) defined a question as “... words, phrases, statements, or nonverbal acts that invite answers or responses.” When a question is properly asked, it can be a powerful communication tool that affects cognition (James, Morse & Howarth, 2010) as well as attitudes and behaviors (Daly & Glowacki, 2017). Due to these benefits, questioning has been extensively utilized in teacher education for various purposes, i.e. obtaining information; initiating interaction; maintaining control of an interaction; arousing interest and curiosity; diagnosing difficulties; expressing interest; ascertaining attitudes, feelings, and opinions; encouraging maximum participation; assessing knowledge; encouraging critical thought and evaluation; communicating (in group contexts) that participation is expected and valued; encouraging group interaction; and maintaining attention in group settings

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(Stapleton, 2019). In this study, questioning fulfilled two of the above purposes: (1) arousing interest and curiosity, and (2) encouraging maximum participation. The student teachers who were interested in the topic of the question were expected to be eager to provide the answer, enhancing their motivation and participation in the classroom. The next section explains how the present study was conducted.

METHOD

This action research, which was “self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach” (Burns, 2010, p. 2), examined the teacher educator’s practice and seek to make it better in a problematic area, i.e. disengagement. To accomplish this task, the teacher educator followed the procedures of planning, enacting, observing, and reflecting as proposed in Kemmis, Taggart and Nixon’s (2014) model. Unlike their original model in the eighties, the present one allows flexibility in that the above steps do not proceed in the exact order. In this study, the teacher educator planned attendance questions as the learning activity to rekindle the student teachers’ engagement, but she did not wait until the observation was completed in order to reflect on what happened in the online classroom. She reflected in action (Schön, 1983) while facilitating the student teachers with the learning activity, and also reflected on action after class.

The participants of the study included 37 student teachers who were taking the course ELT Methods at a university this year. They were selected by means of purposive sampling due to the problem of disengagement they had as described in the previous section. The intervention began after the mid-term exam when the teacher educator found that many *wallflowers* or student teachers who did not take part in the discussions (Hamane et al., 2015) turned out to be high-achieving, good learners. Instead of giving trivia, the teacher educator asked them a question to check their attendance at the beginning of each session until the end of the semester.

To collect the data, the teacher educator wrote a reflective journal in each session and recorded her reflections there. She also made participatory observations and kept field notes based on the observations. At the end of the semester, she administered a structured questionnaire to the student teachers to elicit data about the degree to which they engaged in learning due to the attendance questions. The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements and the student teachers had to select one option out of five (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) which described themselves. Finally, she selected six student teachers and interviewed them to obtain an in-depth understanding of their engagement. The questionnaire resulted in numeric data, which were analyzed by computing the means. The data from the reflective journals and the interview transcriptions were organized in a table, assigned codes, and interpreted based on the categories.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

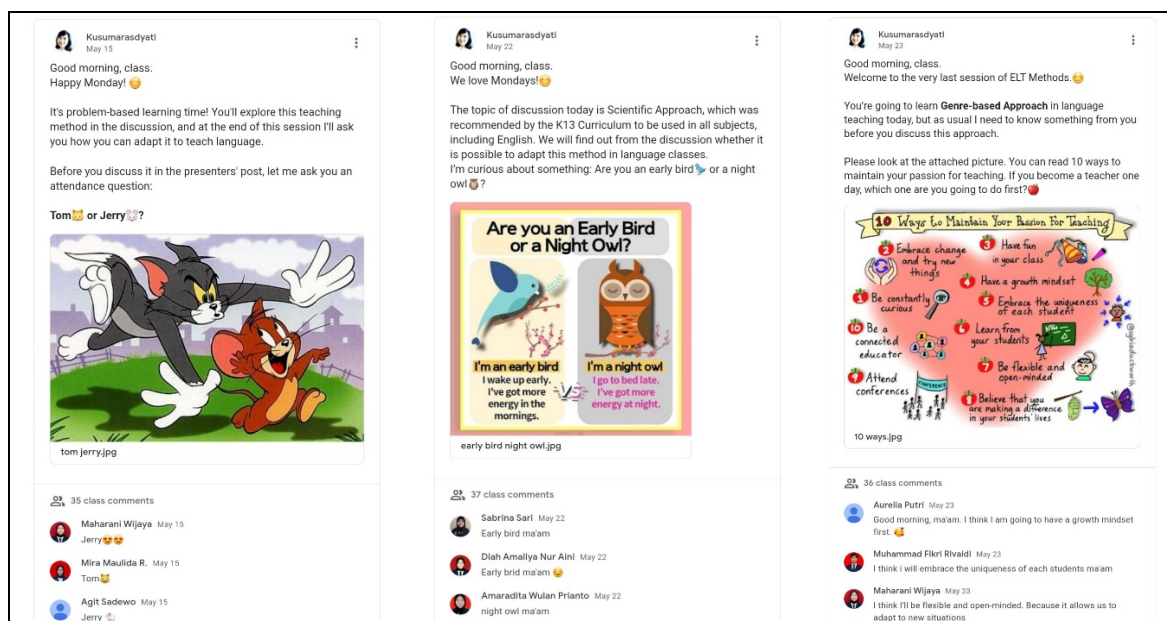
The intervention in the form of attendance questions could successfully make the student teachers more engaged in online learning, and it will be elaborated on below. Afterwards, the results of the questionnaire will be presented to show how well the student teachers engaged in learning due to the intervention. Lastly, the reasons for the increase in learner engagement will be explained at the end of this section.

As mentioned above, the teacher educator began to ask an attendance question in the session after the mid-term exam. At the beginning of this session, she posted in Google Classroom that she needed to check the student teachers’ attendance and asked them to answer the question “Beach or mountain?” in the comment below the post. All of them answered briefly, writing either *beach* or *mountain*. However, one of the high-achieving student teachers gave a philosophical answer: “It’s not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.” Although it did not directly answer the question, it prompted the

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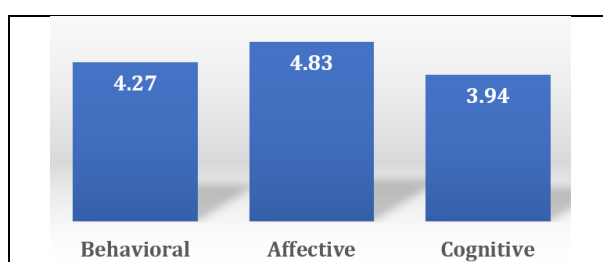
teacher educator to reflect on the intervention. She realized that the simple attendance question could make the student teacher relate it to their personal life in addition to arousing their interest. In the next session, she asked a different question (“Sweet or savory?”) and attached a picture of sweet and savory treats in the post to make it more appealing for the student teachers. The student teachers got elated as expected, as shown in their answers. Many of them responded with *sweet* or *savory*, adding various emojis showing positive feelings. In this session, more student teachers actively participated in the online discussion. The wallflowers—the student teachers who were reluctant to take part in the discussion although they had the knowledge to share with their peers—began to show enthusiasm to contribute their opinions about the issue being discussed. In the subsequent sessions, different attendance questions were posted in Google Classroom: music or movies, Tom or Jerry, and an early bird or a night owl (Figure 1). By this time, the class had become very active in the discussion. Not only did the student teachers ask more questions that required deep thought about the issues, but more wallflowers expressed their sound arguments in the written exchange. Because the attendance questions seemed to work well in making the student teachers more engaged, the teacher educator no longer asked entertaining questions in the last session. Instead, she showed a picture of ten ways to maintain passion in teaching and asked the student teachers which one they would prioritize. Some of them answered briefly by using one sentence, and some others wrote a paragraph to explain why they selected a particular way. In this session, the number of student teachers who participated in the discussion soared to more than 25, and the teacher educator considered them the most engaged in learning.



<Figure 1> Attendance questions in Google Classroom

To obtain more valid inferences about the student teachers’ engagement, it was essential to take the student teacher’s voice about their own engagement into account. Figure 2 showed the attendance questions improved their affective engagement the most ($\bar{X}=4.83$), followed by behavioral engagement ($\bar{X}=4.27$) and cognitive engagement ($\bar{X}=3.94$). The affective engagement demonstrated their feelings toward the online lesson due to the attendance questions. Many of the student teachers strongly agreed with such statements as “*I look forward to attending the online class*” and “*I am interested in learning the materials*” after they had the attendance questions as a part of their learning experience. The behavioral engagement was related to what they did in the online class, such as “*I tried hard to do well*”

and “*I participated in the classroom discussion.*” However, the item that scored the highest was “*I tried to be present on time in Google Classroom.*” The type of engagement which received the least impact from the use of the attendance questions was the cognitive one. The examples of the statements include “*When I study, I try to understand the materials better by relating it to things I already know*” and “*When I study, I figure out how the information might be useful in the real world.*” It did not necessarily mean the attendance questions hardly contributed to the cognitive processes in learning. As a matter of fact, most of the student teachers agreed with the statements about cognitive engagement (indicating relatively high engagement), but from their perspectives the attendance questions had more influence on the affective dimension of engagement. The overall engagement of the student teachers after the intervention was high ($\bar{X}=4.35$), and it could be concluded the intervention in the form of attendance questions successfully improved their behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement.



<Figure 2> Student Teachers' Engagement

To gain a deeper understanding of their engagement, it is essential to examine why the student teachers paid more attention to and expended more effort for the learning process in the classroom after responding to the attendance questions at the beginning of the lessons. For one thing, they considered the activity of answering those questions amusing and motivating, causing them to gain the energy needed to share knowledge in the presentations and the discussions. Many student teachers admitted the attendance questions aroused their interest because the topics of the questions involved the objects or the activities that they were fond of. For instance, most of them enjoyed viewing the cartoon Tom and Jerry in the past, and being asked to share which character they preferred could trigger positive feelings and make them enthusiastic in the subsequent learning activities. In addition to the topics, the pictures and the emojis in the posts were also interesting to them. This finding supported the model of student engagement which views interest as an underlying construct in “energizing and directing the students’ interaction with specific classroom activities” (Ainley, 2012, p. 286). By having an interest in a particular part of learning, the learners improved their motivation and, consequently, were more committed to performing well in the learning activities (Ainley & Ainley, 2011; Groccia, 2018; Kahu et al., 2017; Mazer, 2013; Newmann et al., 1992). This explained why the student teachers in the study became more engaged after answering the attendance questions about topics that interested them.

The second reason for the increased engagement was the interactions between the teacher educator and the student teachers while checking attendance through the questions. One of the student teachers, Irma, gave an account of how such interactions boosted her motivation and engagement: “We liked it when you posted trivia at the beginning of the lesson. They were useful, but we didn’t write anything except say ‘thank you’ or something like that. The attendance questions were different. We could write about things we liked and communicate with you, so we had more spirit.” For her, learning activities in the online class became more motivating if they interacted with the teacher educator rather than simply receiving knowledge by passively reading the trivia. Indeed, the interactions between the educators and the learners have long been recognized as an important factor that contributes to learner engagement (Han, 2021; Leach, 2016; Pianta et al., 2012; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Research even indicates the learners considered the interactions with the educators as the most valuable strategy that made them

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engaged (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). It makes sense as learners generally would like to establish good relationships with the educators, and one way to build rapport is by maintaining communication between two parties (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). In the present study, the teacher educator genuinely would like to know the student teachers' personal preferences about various topics through the attendance questions, making them feel appreciated. After the student teachers answered the questions, the teacher educator responded by thanking them and making favorable remarks about the answers. Such an interaction boosted their motivation to learn and improved their engagement in the rest of the sessions.

Finally, the attendance question about maintaining a passion for teaching was deemed very beneficial by many student teachers so they became more engaged after articulating their preference. The student teachers thought the tips were very practical, easy to understand, presented in an attractive picture, and—most importantly—directly related to the ELT methods that they were learning. Some of them remarked on the tips in a positive light during the interviews. A student teacher said, “I think the tips are very useful and practical. Teaching can be challenging sometimes and we still have to have a passion for teaching. I’m glad I learned ways to maintain my passion. I can apply them later when I become a teacher.” Another student teacher explained, “I just realized there were so many ways to maintain passion for teaching. They are related to the teaching methods we’ve learned in this class. For example, having fun in class makes us enjoy teaching English, and we have to select the best teaching methods that make the class fun.” The student teachers found the prompt of the attendance question containing the tips of maintaining the passion for teaching very relevant to not only the materials of the course but also their future teaching careers. When the student teachers could relate what they learned to their real life, learning became more meaningful and this made them engaged [36]. The attendance question served as a *hook* that captivated the student teachers' interest, then this interest caused them to engage in the subsequent learning activities (Ainley, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The study was an attempt to overcome disengagement among student teachers who learned ELT methods in Google Classroom. The intervention was asking an attendance question about various topics at the beginning of each session to arouse their interest. It proved to increase their behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement, but the improvement occurred in the affective engagement most. There were three reasons for the improved engagement due to the attendance questions. First, the student teachers considered answering the attendance questions a fun, motivating activity. Another reason was providing more opportunities to interact with the teacher educator in the classroom, and the last one was the relevance of the attendance question to the course materials and their real life.

Taking these findings into account, it is strongly recommended that teacher educators perform intervention when a lack of learner engagement occurs in the classroom. A simple question at the beginning of the session to check their attendance can be effective to increase the student teachers' engagement so teacher educators should try using the attendance questions in the intervention, ensuring that the topic of the questions is interesting for the student teachers. When the student teachers are highly engaged as the class begins, learning will be more optimum for the rest of the session.

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