



## English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)

### Module 5: Task 2 – Read 3 Articles

#### Article 5.3: *Responding to Student Questions, Comments, and Office Hour Visits*

Deciding how to respond to students' comments or questions can be complicated. On one hand, you want to ensure that students understand the material; however, you also want to encourage students to participate. So, if you answer their questions too harshly, they might get frustrated and not ask questions or volunteer information in the future. Yet if you answer kindly but vaguely, students may leave class unsure of what the correct information is.

This article will discuss different strategies you can use to answer student questions and respond to the answers they give you. There is also a section specifically on answering questions during your office hours.

### Answering Student Questions

Students might ask questions during your lecture, during group discussions in class, immediately after class, or during your office hours. Here are some considerations and options for how to answer them to maximize the potential for their understanding.

1. **First, listen to their question carefully.** Students might ask a long question that is a bit confusing. In this case, they might get to the point of it by the end of the question, so it is best to keep listening till then. If you don't understand the question, you can ask them to re-state it.
2. **You can ask the question to the class.** If you think other students will know the answer and that it's a good question, asking it to the class is a good way to keep all students interested. Plus, this allows the original question-asking student to hear not only your input, but the ideas of others who are at a similar learning level. For example, if a student asks, "What is the difference between these types of cells?" The instructor might answer, "That's a great question. It has to do with their nuclei. Can anyone tell us how eukaryotic and prokaryotic nuclei are different?"
3. **You can try to help the student answer their own question.** Probing questions and prompts are useful here. This strategy is most useful if you think the student probably knows the answer but lacks self-confidence or if the student is close to knowing the answer and just needs a nudge in the right direction. Just be sure that you don't try for too long to get the student to answer their own question. If they really don't know, then it is embarrassing to have the instructor keep asking in different ways. An example prompt is "Your answer to that question isn't quite right. Consider \_\_\_\_\_ perspective or fact—now, how can you change the answer you first gave?"



4. **You can answer the question yourself.** If you don't have much time and the question is a quick one, you can just answer it and move along.
5. **You can defer the question till later.** This is a useful strategy if it is a complicated question and you don't have enough time to answer it fully. Or, if you know that you will cover the topic in more detail soon, you can tell the student that the answer will be coming in a future lecture. Do try to eventually answer the question. A sample response could be, "Thank you for that question. We don't really have time to cover that topic today, but we can be sure to discuss this more in the next class."
6. **You can ask the student to stay after class or come to your office hours to discuss the question.** This is useful when you think that most students know the answer, and you don't want to take class time to go over the point. Or, it can be useful if the question isn't directly related to your topic that day, but is one that is a useful question that merits discussion, just not class time.
7. **You can refer the student to the textbook, videos, or other instructional material.** If you know that the answer is in a required reading, you can tell the student where to find the answer. This ensures that students know that you expect them to keep up with readings. Or, it can be helpful for students who learn more from reading than listening.
8. **You can admit to the student that you don't know the answer.** Sometimes students ask very clever questions that we haven't considered before. If the student isn't trying to be difficult, this means they are really engaged in the material and care about the topic; therefore, we want to encourage their learning. In these cases, you can state that you haven't thought of that aspect before, but that you will find the answer out for a future class and answer it then. For example, you can say, "Thank you for that important question. I haven't really given that sufficient thought to answer now, but let's plan on discussing this in the next class."

## Responding to Student Comments or Answers

When you ask students a question and they answer, you don't just want to say "Good job!" or "No, that's incorrect"—you want to offer specifics and get the most learning from the student. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

1. **You can reply with a probing question.** Probing questions are useful when the answer or comment a student gave is insufficient in some way. Maybe it is not detailed enough or maybe their response lacks critical thinking. If you want them to get into the question more deeply, a probing question can be useful. Probing questions are useful to analyze a student's statement, such as in helping them articulate their underlying assumptions they believe and deciding if the assumptions are fair.

*Example:*

- Instructor asks: "What are some ways that we might solve the problems presented by \_\_\_\_\_."
- Student answer: "If we try doing \_\_\_\_\_ then that will solve the problem."
- Instructor: "Ok, that's a good beginning, but when you offer that solution, what assumptions are you making about the industry and consumer behavior? And do you think those assumptions are accurate and fair?"
- This probing question can lead to further discussion.

In this way, the instructor asks probing questions to get students to think more deeply about answers they gave. Other probing question types are to ask students to give an example, or to more clearly relate their comment to the topic at hand. At times, students give an answer, but it isn't always clear how their comment is related to the topic. In this case, probing questions can help the student think through what they wanted to point out. If the student can't answer the probing questions you ask, you can open up the question to the larger group, or you can talk them through a variety of responses.

2. **Be sure to praise students for trying.** Thank students for speaking up, even if they get the wrong answer. Smile and use body language to show them you appreciate them. You can walk closer to them, and be sure not to look upset at their answer. Try nodding and making eye contact with them, if eye contact is appropriate culturally. You don't have to go overboard in your praise if they gave an incorrect answer, but it does help if you at least acknowledge that they tried.
3. **You can re-phrase the question.** This is especially useful when students give an answer that is not correct. Maybe the student didn't understand the question, or you caught the student off-guard. Try breaking down the question into smaller parts, giving more background information to the student and then re-asking, or re-phrasing it with more specifics (for example, use words such as "identify the steps" or "compare and contrast").

### **What to Do if Students Don't Respond or Answer your Question**

Sometimes students don't respond to instructor questions. These can be questions asked to the whole group, or to an individual student. Reasons for non-response can include students not knowing the answer, not paying attention when you asked the question, or not finding the question interesting.

*"I think my English level is enough for understanding and learning the lectures. But it is still very hard for me to ... speak English in front of others."*

*~EMI student*

(Dearden & Akincioglu, 2016, p. 11)

One strategy to try is to wait several seconds for the answer before you do anything. Given that students are listening in a non-native language, they'll need extra time to process the question and develop their own answer in English.

Explain to students at the beginning of the course that you will be allowing several seconds of wait time when you ask questions, to allow them time to answer. Then, stick to your word during your classes. The waiting silence can feel uncomfortable at first, but be sure not to answer your own question. That will just train students to wait even longer.

Instead, if no one answers after several seconds, re-phrase your question and try giving them a couple of minutes to share answers with a partner. Try writing the question on the board and reviewing any key terms if necessary. If you think it would be helpful and feasible in your situation, they can use their native language for the small group discussion and then share their answer with the class in English.

With enough practice, students will become more comfortable with answering questions in English during class.

### Interacting during Office Hours

In some cultures, it is more common for students to ask instructors questions than in others, and it can be more or less common to visit office hours. Here, office hours refer to a set time every week that instructors will be in their office so that students can come to ask questions, ask career planning advice, or share accomplishments. And you can get class feedback from your students when they come to your office. Holding office hours is the first step in helping answer student questions, but often it's not enough to just hold them. Many times, instructors



"Student Raising Hand" via Flickr by [UC Davis College of Engineering](#) is licensed under the [CC BY 2.0 license](#).

need to try several strategies to encourage students to come to their office hours and get the help they need. If students don't come, this will lead to lower grades for them, or to more work for the instructor later when it becomes much more difficult to clear up any misunderstandings. It's best to clear them up as soon as possible. Here are some strategies to try to encourage students to come to your office hours.

1. **Explain what office hours are on the first day of class and where your office is located.** You can explain how students can prepare for the office hours and give them examples of questions they might ask. And assure them that you sincerely hope they will come with questions. Remember to include your office hours in your syllabus as well.

2. **Reduce student anxiety about coming to office hours.** Maintain eye contact, if that is culturally appropriate, offer them a seat, close any books on your desk, and give them your attention. Make them feel like you are glad they came and that no questions are stupid. Assure students that the office is a safe space by maintaining an open door, even if only slightly, and be sure not to sit too close to students.
3. **Encourage students to come early in the semester when there is still time to save their grade and to come as often as necessary.** If a student shows signs of struggling in class, it is a good idea to reach out to them by email or in class, or whatever is culturally customary, and specifically invite them to discuss questions with you.
4. **Try requiring students to meet with you early in the semester.** If you have smaller classes, they can come individually. If it is a larger class, you can require them to come in groups. Be sure to tell them to bring 2-3 questions per visit—things that they genuinely don't understand.
5. **Answer questions as clearly and succinctly as possible.** You don't want to talk too long, but you also want to ensure students understand your answer. You can try probing questions or comprehension questions to determine if the student likely understood your answer.

## Reference<sup>1</sup>

Dearden, J., & Akincioglu, M. (2016). *EMI in Turkish universities: Collaborative planning and student voices*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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