Factors Affecting the Questioning Ability of Neophyte Undergraduate Nursing Students in the Classroom

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Factors Affecting the Questioning Ability of Neophyte Undergraduate Nursing Students in the Classroom

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Abstract

Questioning is one of the most commonly used strategies in the instructional process. Well-constructed and appropriate levels of questions stimulate imagination, ignite curiosity, and promote critical thinking. Questioning is an important academic tool in all disciplines but it is more significant for healthcare disciplines for making decisions impacting life and death situations. A grey zone exists on facilitative and hindering factors for asking questions during the instruction deliberations. This study aimed to explore the students' perspective on the significance of asking questions and the factors affecting their ability to ask questions in a classroom setting. A descriptive qualitative study recruited (12) neophyte undergraduate nursing students from three nursing colleges by using an extreme sampling strategy. Teachers were approached to nominate the students who usually ask questions or do not ask questions. Indepth individualized interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide by the primary researcher. Content analysis was performed after transcription. Ethical approval and written and informed consent was obtained. The participants of this study identified several advantages of questioning in relation to enhancing learning, building confidence, improving language competence, and strengthening interpersonal relationships. They also illustrated the factors affecting their questioning ability: motivation or a lack of motivation, presence or absence of confidence, role modeling, language command, the learning environment, and the culture. They also suggested a few measures such as permission to ask questions in the mother or national language and encouragement and support from family members, teachers, and peers. Students' and teachers' training in asking and handling questioning is recommended respectively.

Keywords: Questioning ability, Nursing students, Facilitating factors, Inhibiting factors

1. Introduction

Questioning as a teaching and learning strategy stimulates imagination, ignites curiosity, and fosters a thirst for knowledge [1]. It also challenges students' thinking, particularly their critical thinking skills [2,3]. Questioning plays a vital role in problem-solving, writing ability improvement, validating learning, and directing attention to learning gaps and understanding [1,4]. However, the effective utilization of this strategy depends on several factors. These factors can be categorized as students, teachers, classrooms, and socio-cultural factors.

Students who have prior experience with questioning in their earlier schooling years usually participate more actively in class [2]. Whereas, novice students often struggle with formulating and expressing questions [5]. Additionally, students with limited vocabulary may formulate poorly constructed questions, which teachers may perceive as confrontational, resulting in unexpected responses that discourage further questioning [6]. Similarly, a lack of command over the instructional language,

which was English, can hinder the questioning ability of students [7]. In Pakistan, public schools primarily use Urdu as the instructional language, while public and private universities use English as the medium of instruction [8]. This disparity in instructional languages can hamper the questioning ability of Pakistani students.

Regarding teacher-related factors, teachers' openness to students' questions, focus on content coverage [1,9], demonstration of questioning [10], and competence in questioning developed during their education [9] can either facilitate or hinder students' questioning ability. Lack of ability to engage students in the classroom, a lack of content command, and an emphasis on producing high-scoring achievers through rote learning are factors that limit students' questioning [11].

The classroom atmosphere, considered the most important factor in the literature, needs to be student-friendly, motivating, and respectful to ensure active student participation [2]. Teachers' values, behavior, and questioning methods are crucial in creating such a classroom atmosphere [3]. Defensive behavior from either students or teachers indicates an unfriendly classroom environment for questioning. Additionally, the physical environment of the classroom, such as fixed seating, limited open space, and noise, can negatively impact students' concentration, class participation, and interaction with the teacher, ultimately compromising their thinking and learning abilities [2].

Family, peers, and society at large constitute significant socio-cultural factors for students' questioning. These socio-cultural factors play a role in nurturing and strengthening students' capacity for questioning, as students acquire substantial knowledge through informal means within their society [12].

According to Pardhan and Bhutta [13], students satisfy their thirst for knowledge by seeking answers from their peers as well. Peers can enhance the questioning ability of their fellow students through cooperation. However, negative peer pressure inhibits this ability. Students often refrain from asking questions in class to avoid saving face and minimize the risk of making errors [7].

The cultural background of students can influence their capacity for questioning [14]. In a few cultures, students are discouraged from speaking up in the presence of elders unless explicitly invited to do so [7]. Similarly, in Pakistan, students are typically discouraged from posing questions to individuals in positions of authority based on age or status [15] and many students view their teachers as authority. Therefore, they are afraid of posing questions to their teachers. University teachers face the challenge of promoting active student participation in classes to foster higher-order thinking [16,17]. University education aims to cultivate students' independence and critical questioning skills for their academic and professional pursuits [9].

Most of the existing literature in nursing primarily focuses on the questioning skills of teachers in clinical settings [15,18—21]. Similarly, the majority of studies on student questioning are quantitative and conducted within clinical teaching contexts in Western settings [14,22]. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore students' perspectives on the factors that influence their ability to ask questions within a classroom setting. This study answered the following research questions:

- What factors facilitate the neophyte nursing students' ability to ask questions in the classroom?
- What factors hinder the neophyte nursing students' ability to ask questions in the classroom?

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

A descriptive qualitative study design was employed to explore the factors that either facilitated or hindered students' questioning ability, as perceived by the students themselves. This design is particularly suitable when the researcher aims to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within its natural context [23].

2.2. Study population, setting, and duration

The study population comprised first-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students from three nursing colleges: one from the private sector, another from the semi-private sector, and the third from the public sector. All three colleges are regulated by the Pakistan Nursing Council; however, they vary in terms of infrastructure and student population. This study was conducted as part of a master's thesis from April to September 2020.

2.3. Sampling

The researchers employed an extreme sampling method to select the participants. Extreme sampling is a subtype of purposive sampling that involves selecting participants from either end of the spectrum concerning the phenomenon of interest [24]. In this study, the extremes were defined as students who ask questions and those who do not ask

questions in class. Four students from each college, representing both extremes, were recruited, resulting in a total of twelve nursing students.

2.4. Selection procedure

To determine the students' questioning status, three teachers who were involved in teaching first-year students (two nursing teachers and one basic science teacher) were approached to propose the names of ten students, five from each extreme. The list of identified students was reviewed, and those students who were identified as belonging to either extreme by more than two teachers were recruited for the study. Care was taken to ensure gender representation among the selected students.

2.5. Data collection

Individual interviews were conducted with the students, either face-to-face or online. Given the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic during the data collection period, most students were not physically available for face-to-face interviews. As a workaround, five online interviews were conducted and recorded through Google Meet. Seven students agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews, which were audio recorded. Face-to-face interviews took place at the respective colleges while adhering to COVID-19 protocols. A semi-structured interview guide with planned and unplanned probes was utilized. Field notes were taken during the interviews to capture nonverbal communication. With the exception of one student, all participants preferred to speak in Urdu. The average interview duration was 30−45 min. The interviews were directly translated into English by the primary investigator (PI), who is proficient in both languages.

2.6. Data analysis plan

The data were manually analyzed through content analysis by the PI in consultation with a research supervisor who possesses extensive experience in qualitative research. The data analysis followed the steps described by Creswell and Creswell [25]. The participants' responses were compiled for each interview question and carefully read multiple times before coding. Relevant words and phrases were identified, highlighted, and coded to capture both manifest and latent meanings. Field notes were integrated into the transcripts as appropriate. When analyzing the participants' narratives, their questioning status, gender, and academic grades from intermediate education were considered and incorporated into selected quotes. Based on similarities and differences among the codes, categories, and subcategories were generated. The coding, categories, and subcategories were verified by the thesis supervisor.

2.7. Rigor of the study

To ensure the quality of the study, the researchers implemented the measures of trustworthiness [26] which are summarized in Table 1.

2.8. Ethical considerations

Approval for this study was sought from the institution review board (113-933-2020). Written informed consent was taken from the students after briefing them about the study purpose, time commitment, rights to refuse and withdraw as well as information about the confidentiality and safety of data. Codes instead of names were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

3. Findings

3.1. Characteristics of participants

A total of 12 students took part in this study, with a mean age of 19.5 ± 1.5 years. An equal number (n=6) of participants from both genders and extremes were included. The majority of students (n=10) had a

Table 1. Measures taken to ensure the rigor of the study.

Criterion	Measures to Ensure Criterion of Trustworthiness
Credibility	Included students both extremes with regard to their questioning behavior.
	Used planned and unplanned probes in the interviews to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' responses.
	Codes and categories were discussed and finalized with the guidance of the research supervisory team.
Dependability & Conformability	Audio recordings were listened to by the PI twice before transcribing.
	Transcriptions were validated with recordings.
	Sought clarifications/elaboration during and after the interviews.
Transferability	Details of the participants as well as methods of research are described in the pertinent sections
Authenticity	Took field notes and integrated them into the analysis of narratives

background in public sector schooling and had experienced a gender-segregated educational system. Most of the students (n=4) in the asking questioning extreme also had high grades in intermediate education.

3.2. Factors affecting questioning

The interviews revealed several facilitating and hindering factors that were categorized into five categories: motivation, confidence, language command, learning environment, and culture. Except for culture, the students' narratives indicated how each of these factors either facilitated or inhibited their questioning. For clarity, the participants' codes denote their extremes as either asking questions (AQ) or not asking questions (NQ), along with the sequence of their interviews. Additionally, unless otherwise specified, the term "students" refers to the study participants.

3.2.1. Motivation

The participants revealed that motivation played a significant role in facilitating questioning, while a lack of motivation hindered their ability to ask questions. Many of them mentioned their curiosity and the desire to obtain high grades as motivating factors for asking questions. As one participant reflected, *"Since childhood, I have been curious to know things, and I continue asking questions until my curiosity is satisfied"* (AQ-2). Another participant stated, *"I developed this habit while striving to achieve good marks in matric examinations"* (AQ-1).

Some students also explicated the relationship between questioning and deep study, where asking questions helped clarify concepts. For example, a student expressed, *"When I delve deeply into my studies, questions arise in my mind"* (AQ-1). Conversely, a lack of clarity about the content hindered students' ability to ask questions. One participant noted, *"In nursing college, teachers use PowerPoint presentations and teach concepts quickly without providing explanations. This makes it difficult to understand the concepts and ask questions"* (AQ-9).

Several participants believed that encouragement from teachers and peers motivated them to ask questions. They appreciated the role of teachers in developing their questioning ability, as exemplified by the following excerpt:

> I was not fond of questioning, but in the second grade, one of my teachers motivated me to ask questions. Gradually, with the help of that teacher and my parents …, I became a good student who achieved high grades and asked questions (AQ-10).

Peers also had a significant influence, as their questioning motivated quieter students to ask questions. One student revealed, *"When most students in the class start asking questions, I get motivated and gain the courage to ask questions myself. Sometimes, I do ask questions"* (NQ-3).

3.2.2. Confidence

Confidence was identified by the participants as a significant factor that facilitated questioning, whereas its absence hindered the ability to ask questions. According to the participants' perspectives, confidence was instilled in them through the encouragement and support of their family members, teachers, and peers.

Some students reported that their family members played a crucial role in nurturing their inherent curiosity by responding to their questions. However, not all students had this privilege. As one participant stated, *my family members helped in develop my questioning ability. My elder brother used to ask me questions, which encouraged me to ask questions if anything was unclear* (AQ-1). In contrast, another participant expressed, *"Although family plays an important role, my family support is weak because my parents are not well-educated, and I am the elder among my siblings. Nobody is there to support me"* (NQ-11).

Apart from family members, teachers' characteristics, such as having a welcoming attitude and responding politely to students' questions, played a vital role in fostering students' confidence to ask questions. One participant acknowledged, *"Nursing teachers always encourage us to ask questions. A few teachers say that 'we have learned a lot from questioning so please ask questions.' They frequently ask questions from students"* (AQ-10). Similarly, another participant shared, *"If the teachers are friendly and entertain students' questions well, we become confident to ask questions"* (AQ-10). Conversely, participants were afraid of teachers who possessed a discouraging or sarcastic attitude toward students. For example, one participant explained how the fear of school teachers inhibited his ability to ask questions:

> The reasons for not speaking in front of teachers were that they were very strict, and when I asked questions, they made fun of me or replied rudely. This decreased my courage to ask questions. Therefore, I could not gain confidence in asking questions. This happened to me in class 7, before that, I used to ask questions (NQ-4).

In addition to teachers, peers' encouragement and support also played a role in enhancing students' questioning ability. The participants identified various helpful behaviors among peers, such as

selecting appropriate words for phrasing a question, motivating quieter students to ask questions, and sharing questions on behalf of others. One participant acknowledged, *"A few of my friends shared their questions with me to ask on their behalf. This opportunity also helped me to gain confidence and be a prominent student who asked questions"* (AQ-1). Furthermore, non-verbal communication within the learning environment affected their confidence, as discussed in the category of learning environment.

In addition to family members, teachers, and peers, the ability to formulate a question was also recognized as a factor influencing the act of asking or not asking questions. This issue was primarily linked to language commands. Some participants expressed that although they had questions in mind, they refrained from asking because they were uncertain about the structure or formation of their questions. As one participant explained, *"I think … my question is not appropriate and well-structured; therefore, I do not dare to ask [the question]"* (NQ-3). Unlike others, some participants shared a strategy they used to overcome the challenge of question formulation, which subsequently enhanced their confidence in asking questions. For example, one participant said, *"I used to write my questions in a register … By writing the questions, I could modify them before asking"* (AQ-12).

Some participants also believed that teachers should not suppress students' questioning, even if they ask irrelevant questions, as it can negatively impact their confidence. Similarly, for students who lack the confidence to ask questions spontaneously, teachers should encourage them to bring their questions in writing. As one participant suggested, *"We should make it mandatory for those students who do not ask questions to bring one or two questions in writing. Then we should encourage them to ask those questions in the class"* (AQ-2). The participants were aware of their role in building the confidence of other students, stating, *"We, as class fellows, have to support quiet students to ask questions. We have to make them realize that if they do not ask questions, how will they clarify their queries?"* (AQ-2).

3.2.3. Command on English language

Due to the English medium of instruction in nursing colleges, students were required to ask questions in English. However, a lack of command over the English language was reported as a significant obstacle to asking questions. The students shared difficulties in finding appropriate words for formulating questions and accurately pronouncing certain words. Furthermore, they faced grammatical challenges, as expressed by a student: *"A major hindrance in questioning, I feel, is my accent. Moreover, I cannot differentiate between feminine and masculine pronouns. This causes embarrassment, so I avoid asking questions sometimes"* (AQ-1).

For most students, their previous schooling had been conducted in Urdu or the local language. The participants revealed that even concepts in English as a subject were explained in Urdu. Additionally, teachers did not expect students to converse in English, resulting in a lack of command over the English language. Some participants also admitted that they had never realized earlier that English would be the medium of instruction in higher education. For instance, one participant shared the following experience:

> I studied in a school where teaching and learning mostly occurred in our native language (Saraiki - a language of southern Punjab) and sometimes in Urdu. We were not exposed to being taught in English. We were not aware that using our native language in class would create problems when we got to a university (NQ-7).

A few students mentioned that they sought help from their friends or senior students to overcome their difficulties in communicating in English. One student acknowledged, *"In my class, there are a few students who face difficulty in speaking English. They remain quiet in class, but after class, they contact me or other classmates for their queries"* (AQ-2). However, the majority of students expressed a preference for asking questions in their first language (Urdu - the national language) because it would enable them to ask more questions. Some even desired to ask questions in their local languages, such as Saraiki and Pushto. The participants strongly justified the use of local or national languages to enhance students' confidence in asking questions, as one of the students shared:

> We are expected to speak in English, but I think it is necessary to switch to Urdu because language is less important than clarifying the concepts. We are unable to ask questions in English, but we can comfortably ask in Urdu. In our class, there are two students who understand the Pushto language better. One of our teachers always allows them to ask questions in Pushto, and he answers their questions in Pushto along with English (AQ-10).

3.2.4. Learning environment

According to the participants, the learning environment played a significant role in their ability to ask questions. They viewed the environment not

only in terms of the physical setting but also the intellectual and social aspects, including the reactions and support from their peers and teachers. Regarding the physical environment, the participants mentioned class size and seating arrangements as factors influencing their questioning ability. They noted that in large classes, not all students had an equal chance to ask questions due to limited time. One student reported, *"Due to the class size, every student did not get a chance to ask a question; mainly because there is limited time for questioning"* (NQ-4).

Several students, especially those who did not ask questions, expressed that teachers tended to give more opportunities to higher achievers who typically occupied the front seats. According to their perspective, these practices limited the chances for low achievers and students sitting at the back to ask questions. One student stated, *"Teachers mostly interact with students who are sitting in the front of the class. So even when some students would like to sit in the front, they did not get the seat in front because a few students reserve front seats for their friends"* (NQ-8). They advocated for changing these practices and suggested that teachers should rotate students' seating. Furthermore, teachers should not solely give opportunities to high achievers to ask questions but should engage quiet students by asking them questions. As one student suggested, *"Teachers should not give a chance only to front-row students to ask questions"* (NQ-3).

In terms of the intellectual environment, many students reported it as a deterrent factor for asking questions, while others highlighted its positive impact. Students explained that intellectual insecurity arises when they feel a sense of insecurity in the class, which can be influenced by both peer and teacher behavior. Some students also connected intellectual insecurity to family disputes at home, which led to emotional disturbances that hindered their thinking ability for questioning. Rude responses from teachers, unexpected comments, scolding, and ignoring inactive students were major sources of fear that prevented students from asking questions. One participant expressed:

> Sometimes, a teacher says you do not know this! This was covered in your previous grade or class. This makes me embarrassed in front of my classmates. What will they think about me if I do not know this concept? We may forget the previously learned content (NQ-11).

Fear of being insulted by teachers was not only felt by inactive students but also by students who asked questions. An active student stated, *"If a teacher gives a shut-up call to another student on his/her question, then I get afraid and never ask a question in that class to avoid being insulted"* (AQ-10). Some students associated teachers' rude behavior in the class with a lack of command over the content. One student explained, *"In school when a teacher enters the class, she usually starts scolding students because of some minor discipline-related issue … Maybe the teacher wants to pressurize students before starting the lecture so they remain quiet during the session"* (NQ-3).

Students mentioned that some of them asked irrelevant questions to judge teachers' knowledge and confidence. They offered strategies for teachers, such as calling students who ask irrelevant questions to their offices, exploring the reasons behind their irrelevant questions, and responding to students in a non-threatening way. For students who were unable to ask their teachers questions due to fear or low self-confidence, they sought alternative strategies to satisfy their curiosity. One student stated, *"If it is not possible to ask the teacher, then I used to ask a senior student or search on the internet or get help from my elder brother"* (AQ-6).

Peers in the class also played a role in hindering students' questioning ability. Passing comments and making fun of the questions asked created insecurity among students. One student highlighted, *"When someone asks a question, there are students who make fun of him/her. Therefore, I try not to ask a question because I am aware of being made fun of"* (NQ-4). A female participant mentioned that peer pressure had a more severe negative influence on female students, stating, *"Female students are afraid of their male colleagues because they tend to pass comments that may embarrass them in class. That is why they think it is better not to participate in the class"* (NQ-11).

To address the fear and apprehension related to questioning, students suggested creating a friendly classroom environment, improving relationships between students and teachers, and concealing teachers' emotions. One participant suggested, *"Teachers should control their emotions. Teacher's response to students' questions helps them boost their confidence"* (NQ-12). Another student advocated, *"We need to break the wall of fear between students and teachers"* (AQ-2).

Contrary to negative experiences, some students appreciated the intellectual environment in their nursing college, stating that it was more open compared to school, and they felt comfortable asking questions. Additionally, students appreciated the provision of pre-reading material by teachers, as it helped them comprehend the content and identify potential queries before the session, contributing to their ability to ask questions.

3.2.5. Culture

An analysis of students' narratives revealed that culture is a crucial factor that hindered their ability to ask questions in the classroom. Several participants highlighted the cultural norms that emphasized respect for elders, whether they were parents, elder siblings, or teachers. Consequently, their curiosity was contingent upon the response of their elders. Instead of addressing the students' questions, elders demanded obedience. As a result, students hesitated to ask questions, as one participant explained:

> In our culture, we do not ask elders many questions. The younger individual must obey and believe whatever the elders say. When a younger person asks a question, elders usually scold them. So, it affects the questioning ability of the individual (AQ-9).

Interaction with individuals of the opposite gender also served as a barrier, limiting students' ability to ask questions, except in cases where they had a close relationship. Most male participants mentioned that they were comfortable interacting with the opposite gender at home or in informal settings. On the other hand, female participants noted that questioning their elder male family members was not expected of them. Consequently, their thoughts and feelings were suppressed, and their courage and confidence to ask questions were not developed, particularly in co-educational systems. One female participant explained:

> Females are very weak in questioning because of our society. They remain suppressed in their family and society. In our culture, it is less common to ask questions from males and even talk to them in a loud voice. It is considered disrespectful. We are nurtured in such a culture, so we remain quiet in co-educational systems as well (NQ-11).

The social norms and values regarding interaction with the opposite gender, which were shaped at home, were further influenced by the participants' educational backgrounds. Those who attended co-educational schools had more comfort in interacting with the opposite gender, while those who attended gender-segregated schools lacked such opportunities until they entered nursing college. As noted in this study, approximately 20% of the students had their schooling in co-educational systems, while the rest came from gender-segregated educational systems. Consequently, it was challenging for them to quickly unlearn their norms. For instance, a male participant expressed reluctance to ask questions such as:

> I have never studied in a co-educational system before, so I feel hesitant to ask questions in front of girls. I might say the wrong words or have difficulty pronouncing them. It could lead to embarrassment in front of the girls … the female students might think that I don't understand this concept. Thus, I am shy to ask questions from female teachers as well (NQ-7).

In contrast to the above explanation, students who had studied in co-educational systems during their schooling felt more comfortable asking questions. A female participant highlighted the positive aspects of a co-educational system, *"I studied in a co-educational system from class 6 onwards, where girls and boys were given equal opportunities to ask questions. This helped me develop my confidence to ask questions in front of boys"* (AQ-6).

The participants not only reflected on how cultural norms hindered their ability to ask questions but also provided recommendations to overcome these factors. For example, one male participant suggested, *"The classroom environment should be friendly so that we should not hesitate to ask any questions in front of the opposite gender"* (AQ-10). Similarly, a female student recommended, *"Teachers should boost the confidence level of students, especially females. Encourage them to ask questions and provide responses"* (AQ-2).

4. Discussion

This study was undertaken to investigate the factors that influence the questioning ability of neophyte undergraduate nursing students. It is important to note that the students themselves were well aware of the factors that affect their ability to ask questions. Consequently, they not only identified these factors but also proposed strategies to overcome them. The proposed strategies could be valuable for educators in promoting students' questioning skills and enhancing their learning.

The findings of the study revealed that students' motivation and confidence in asking questions are closely intertwined. Motivation and confidence require encouragement from teachers and peers, as well as a friendly classroom environment. This finding aligns with previous research [2,3].

Consistent with Asian literature [2,7,27], this study found that family members play a significant role in the development of students' questioning ability. Analysis of the findings indicated that students from

educated families received support for questioning, which enhanced their confidence in asking questions.

The study also affirmed the crucial role of teachers and peers in motivating and encouraging students to ask questions. Support from teachers and peers helps students socialize within the educational system, whereas a lack of support makes it difficult for students to express their thoughts and pose questions. These findings align with previous studies [6,9].

Teachers play a significant role in facilitating or inhibiting students' questioning. Their mastery of the content, training in handling student queries, and use of active teaching and learning strategies are pivotal in developing and strengthening students' questioning skills. Tofade et al. [10] maintained that when teachers ask questions in the classroom, students are encouraged to do the same as they emulate their teachers. This finding was also confirmed by our study.

Concurrent to existing literature [2,3,7,9], our study emphasized the necessity of a motivating and non-threatening environment for students' questioning. Moreover, measures should be taken to ensure equal opportunities for students, such as rotating the seating arrangement in the classroom.

A major issue that prevents students from asking questions is a lack of command over the English language. The majority of participants in this study spoke Pushto, Punjabi, Saraiki, or Urdu as their first language, while English was predominantly used as the language of instruction in nursing colleges. This lack of proficiency in English is a known issue when it is a second or third language for students [7] due to the use of their mother tongue to deliver course content [28–30]. Language proficiency encompasses vocabulary knowledge, diction, usage, and pronunciation. Majoka and Khan [31] stated that in Pakistani schools, English teaching focuses more on reading and writing skills, while speaking skills, including pronunciation, are given less emphasis. Similarly, in nursing colleges focus of English teaching is more on reading and writing. This affects students' ability to express themselves confidently. English teachers should also give equal importance to listening and speaking skills. This would help improve students' competence in the language and consequently enhance their questioning ability.

It is also important to note that certain ethnic groups in Pakistan have heavy accents that affect their pronunciation in English. Teachers should be aware of these pronunciation issues related to the specific ethnicity of their students. Teachers should create an environment that respects the diversity of accents among students but gradually works to overcome their shortcomings. Initially, teachers may encourage students to ask questions regardless of their accent.

Given the contextual realities of student English language development and its implications, finding an amicable solution to this issue is necessary. Some researchers [8,28,30] argue that instead of English, students should be allowed to use their local/national language because asking questions is more important than language proficiency. However, Manan et al. [32] maintained that asking questions in English gives students an opportunity to improve their English language skills through practice. Taking into account the merits and demerits of these arguments, a code-switching technique [8,30] could be an amicable solution. Accordingly, teachers would primarily use English in the classroom but use their judgment to switch to Urdu for concept clarification and allow students to ask questions when they have difficulty. However, the appropriate use of this strategy would require teacher training.

The current study highlighted gender as a factor that affects questioning. Female students, particularly those raised in conservative families that do not provide equal opportunities to females, have lower confidence in asking questions [33]. While changing cultural norms and values in society at large may take time, certain measures can be implemented at the institutional level by teachers to minimize the effect of these cultural norms on students' questioning and to promote socialization between students of different genders. Since most nursing students in Pakistan come from conservative families, teachers should be aware of the factors that promote and hinder students' questioning skills. They would be in a better position to understand student-related factors and help them overcome these barriers.

Well-designed orientation sessions in nursing colleges can be helpful for newly enrolled students from diverse schooling and cultural backgrounds. Various strategies can be implemented to overcome the identified deficiencies. Neophyte nursing students can be trained in peer learning [34], which may foster friendly relationships among them and improve their language competence. This could be achieved through the use of active teaching and learning strategies such as case-based learning, which enhances students' confidence in posing questions [2]. Trained and experienced teachers from both genders should be assigned to the first year of the BSN program to provide better orientation and facilitation to students. The information presented in this study can assist in designing appropriate intervention studies to develop students' questioning ability in nursing colleges.

5. Conclusion

This study elucidated that various factors exerted an impact on students' questioning ability. Some factors, such as their family and school background, which may have influenced them in the past, are irrevocable. Nonetheless, certain factors can be altered by nursing colleges to enhance students' questioning skills. For instance, training students in the art of questioning, fostering a conducive questioning environment within the college, and employing trained and experienced teachers can all contribute to this endeavor. By incorporating this knowledge, nursing colleges can design and implement programs aimed at nurturing students' capacity to ask questions, which will not only benefit their academic pursuits but also facilitate their professional development.

Submission declaration

This article is neither published nor submitted for publication in any journal. This will not considered for publication in a language other than English. This is an original work of the authors.

Ethical Information

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board and Ethical Committee of Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University through letter number 113-933-2020. A summary of the ethical procedures followed in this study is presented in section 2.8 of the methodology section.

Conflict of interest

There is not conflict of interest.

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