CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an introduction of the study, which covers the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, scope of the study, the significance of the study, definition of key terms, and thesis organization.

1.1. Background of the Study

Nowadays, many higher education programs strive to make students become proficient English graduates to broaden their opportunities to get their future jobs, either at the national or international level. As Kirubahar, Santhi, and Subashini (2010) state, the relationship between a person's ability to get and maintain a job and the ability to speak in English is very significant. This requirement, no exception, also applies to students majoring in Engineering. Shrestha, Pahari, and Awasthi (2016) reported that English is the most essential language in the career of engineering students all over the world.

However, there are still many college students with low English-speaking performance. They have difficulty in pronouncing English words, discussing issues related to their major in English due to insufficient vocabulary mastery, and grammar knowledge. They also feel hard to recognize their true skill. In addition to those factors, their teachers also become an issue. Sometimes they only have general English skills and do not have a specific skill to teach English in some majors. Some research studies found that students' failure to learn English in particular disciplines was caused by a lack of appropriately trained English language lecturers at their major (Hoa, 2016; Luo & Garner, 2017; Patra & Mohanty, 2016).

This study investigates a particular practice of online conversations called Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) that I applied to overcome my unfamiliarity as a teacher with specialized English required in specific fields, i.e. Engineering. The implementation was expected to improve the Engineering students' speaking skills by directing them to have online English conversations with their foreign counterparts, i.e. non-native speakers of English

who were expected to have shared interests in Engineering topics. The speaking skills expected to improve were their Engineering-related vocabulary use, proper grammar usage, and pronunciation.

SCMC is a technique that has been used by many language learners to improve their speaking skills by interacting with other language learners. It is commonly mentioned as online exchanges, virtual exchanges, or online conversations. The interaction takes place by utilizing various online platforms allowing camera and audio access to support the online conversations, for instance, Bigbluebutton (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017); SecondLife (Kruk, 2016); Audio Chat module of the NetOP software (AbuSeileek & Qatawneh, 2013); and MSN and Facebook (Ke & Cahyani, 2014). Meanwhile, the SCMC had been implemented in this research is SCMC utilizing online platforms to get speaking partners i.e. non-native speakers of English who were expected to have interest in Engineering topic, such as Speaking24, Speaky, and Free4talk. Then, they were invited to have the conversations with the Engineering students via Skype.

The technique was inspired by O'Dowd and Lewis's (2016) theory of virtual exchanges with its principle of autonomy, reciprocity, and sense of responsibility for a successful exchange. They mentioned why we need to engage university students in virtual collaboration with distant peers. It is considered as an effective way to improve their foreign language skills, especially in this study i.e. English-speaking skills. Besides, it allows them to practice authentic language use. In this way, the teacher's role is as a facilitator and encourages the students to take responsibility for building and improving their own themes.

Several studies have indicated the features of Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication media allowing EFL students to access global communication, it affected English-speaking production, accuracy, and fluency improvements, such as implementing synchronous online English communication done by letting learners interact with foreign counterparts in their fields of interest about the importance of English and Internet (Mustafa, 2018), and culture (Eguchi, 2014). Bueno-Alastuey (2011) also proved that synchronous voice-based CMC with different L1 counterparts improved their speaking achievement, in terms of pronunciation. Other studies support it by noticing that SCMC facilitates learners

to improve their oral skills (Ko, 2012; Satar, 2008), by giving each other's feedback (Gurzynski-Weiss & Baralt, 2014).

There are also studies examining the implementation of Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication that found several perceptions in terms of oral performance by interacting with native speakers via SecondLife, one of the SCMC platforms. They found that EFL learners felt motivated to always talk in English and decrease their anxiety in using the language (Kruk, 2016; Melchor-Couto, 2017), it made them enjoy talking with native speakers. It is also found as an effective way to improve learners' oral skills (Abrams, 2003; Brown, 2016; Kung & Eslami, 2018; Spring, Kato & Mori, 2019).

The counterparts of the language learners in those studies are native speakers. It is ideal to have EFL learners interact with native speakers of the target language learnt. However, I tried to involve non-native speakers of English as the Engineering students' speaking counterparts in their SCMC practice. They were from any country and at any level of English proficiency as the online platforms did not allow them to choose specific criteria of their English proficiency.

They were chosen as the students' counterparts referred on some research findings stated that the presence of non-native speakers is precisely needed as it is noticed that university graduates are more likely interacting using English with non-native speakers of English in their future employment. Engineers and other professionals need to use English in collaborating with other non-native speakers in the global workplace (Dooly, 2015; Graddol, 2006), and as Granding and Hedderich (2009) also suggested that as Engineers, they should combine their language skills with other beneficial thing gained, i.e. intercultural competence to prepare their future interactions with non-native speakers of English. Then, the context of interaction in this study is allowing the Engineering students to talk with non-native speakers of English and expected to bring beneficial effects on their speaking performance in their future jobs.

Other than that, it also provides benefits on the improvements of vocabulary use due to the convenience while interacting (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2015); grammar usage and pronunciation due to great opportunities for getting corrective feedback and creating modified outputs (Bueno-Alastuey, 2010; Sato & Lyster,

2007). However, the vocabulary improvement in Kohn and Hoffstaedter (2015) is in terms of general topics, while this study discusses it in a specific one, i.e. about Engineering.

Therefore, SCMC in this study differs from the other studies in terms of the students' speaking counterparts and the topics. With these gaps, it needs to be further studied for its effects in improving their English-speaking skills: Engineering-related vocabulary (Erv) use, grammar usage, and pronunciation that are considered important to be mastered. Their perceptions towards it in their speaking practice also need to be investigated.

Based on the aforementioned importance, this study aims to investigate how the technique, i.e. SCMC with non-native speakers of English affects the Engineering students' speaking skills, and how they perceive the SCMC in their speaking practice.

1.2. Research Questions

Specifically, the research questions are formulated as follows.

1. How does the SCMC with non-native speakers of English affect students' speaking skills?
2. How is the SCMC in speaking practice perceived by the students?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to investigate how the SCMC between Engineering students and their foreign counterparts, i.e. non-native speakers of English invited from online speaking platforms and expected to have shared interests in Engineering as their topic preference, affects the students' speaking skills (Engineering-related vocabulary use, proper grammar usage, and proper pronunciation), and how they perceive the SCMC in their speaking practice.

1.4. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on how Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication with non-native counterparts affects students' speaking skills, i.e. Engineering-related vocabulary use, proper grammar usage, and proper pronunciation. It also focuses on how the students perceive the use of SCMC in their speaking practice.

This present study involves fifteen vocational secondary students in employee class majoring in Engineering. They were engaged in nine-recorded SCMCs with non-native speakers of English from any country and at any English proficiency level who were expected to have similar interest in Engineering field as their speaking counterparts for one semester.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is expected to bring some significance as follows:

- **Theoretical Significance**

In many literatures, the use of Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) is still limited as a way to learn and improve English by discussing general/common topics between two English learners. Therefore, this study will enrich the literature related to the implementation of SCMC in online English interaction talking about the specific ones.

In line with the results of this study, it is possible that this study will contribute as a reference for further studies. This study indicates the ineffectiveness of SCMC on speaking skills, for instance: on Engineering-related vocabulary use due to the presence of foreign counterparts who were not interested to talk about it; and on proper grammar and pronunciation usage due to their lack of attention to it. It opens the possibility for other researchers to further discuss the effects of SCMC by modifying it. Modification can be in the form of ensuring the availability of foreign counterparts who are specifically interested in certain topics of discussion and are able to facilitate and trigger discussions about these matters, the involvement of native speakers can also be considered in terms of improving grammar and pronunciation aspects.

- **Practical Significance**

This study gives contribution to English teachers and learners as SCMC users, specifically in improving the learners' speaking skills. They can gain beneficial outcomes on speaking skills by conducting better SCMC practice with good preparations by reflecting on the results of this study where SCMC could not trigger Erv use, proper grammar usage, and pronunciation.

With the result found that many of the students' speaking counterparts were not interested to talk about Engineering, the other teacher can guide the students to

foster their insight about their major with their peers first before interacting with their counterparts so that they can be able to start and lead the topic in their conversation with such counterparts. Furthermore, the results mentioning anxiety experienced by the low achievers that made them not concerned about proper grammar usage and pronunciation will motivate the other learners to learn more on basic grammar and drill their pronunciation skills first before interacting with their foreign counterparts. It may make them, especially for low achievers to speak with more sentences than only short responses. It probably triggers their counterparts to give feedback on what grammar mistakes they made, as it is also found that there is no concern from either the students or their foreign counterparts on correctness.

- **Professional Significance**

The results of the effects of SCMC on speaking skills and the students' perceptions of it in this study contribute to the teachers' awareness about the importance of monitoring and better preparation.

For instance, prompting their students to brainstorm what they know about Engineering from related subjects they have studied before conducting SCMC or allowing them to read about Engineering materials. It is needed to always give them more opportunities to learn proper grammar and pronunciation from other media they have and what they got from previous SCMC before practicing more on the next SCMC sessions. The teacher can be aware of monitoring the implementation and the result of the students' SCMC activities regularly by reviewing and reflecting on what they did, for instance, in terms of grammar mistakes and what they should do/prepare in their next session, for example learning more to give them awareness on the way of fixing the grammar mistakes they made, and use them better in the next SCMC.

- **Significance of Policymaking**

This study can contribute to supporting policymaking in terms of ICT use and the general target of undergraduate skills as covered in the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, Number 3, 2020, concerning the national standard of higher education. It is stated that the graduates must be able to implement technology that pays attention to and applies humanities values in accordance with their field of expertise.

As it also hinted that SCMC with different cultural backgrounds might be a good way for building intercultural competence, this study may contribute to supporting the policy. The involvement of technology, computers, and the internet might lead the users to ignore interacting with other people in person. However, if such SCMC is implemented with a better way of monitoring and preparations as mentioned in the previous points of significance, the presence of the foreign counterparts with different cultural and educational backgrounds can improve the other students' curiosity and better quality of communication. Because of that, the humanities values can be maintained, they will be more open to talking to other people, sharing about what they have discussed with their foreign counterparts. It will not reduce the students' interest to meet and socialize with other people.

It may also suggest the policymakers more specifically in improving the policies of ICT use, especially for language learning with foreign counterparts by improving SCMC, developing plans of its implementation, and providing new platforms aimed to provide EFL learners opportunity to practice their major-related spoken English.

1.6. Definition of the Key Terms

To avoid misinterpretation, the definition of some important terms used in the study are given as follows.

- *Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication* refers to an interaction between Engineering students and non-native speakers of English who are expected to have shared interests, i.e. Engineering to talk about. It was conducted synchronously using computer tools through web platforms to find the students' counterparts i.e. non-native speakers of English, like speaking24, speaky, and free4talk, and directed them to talk via Skype as a telecommunication application that has an access to set the camera, microphone, and recording tools for supporting synchronous interactions that can be recorded.
- *Engineering students* refer to the Indonesian EFL learners majoring in Industrial Engineering who were involved in online English interaction with non-native speakers of English as their speaking counterparts talking about the expected theme, i.e. Engineering for one semester.

- *Non-native speakers of English* refer to the Engineering students' counterparts from any country and at any level of English proficiency. They were invited from web platforms, i.e. Speaking24, Speaky, and Free4talk to talk via Skype. They are non-native speakers of English who were expected to have similar interests to talk about Engineering.

- *Speaking skills* refer to the use of Engineering-related vocabularies, proper grammar usage, and proper pronunciation of the students while they interacted with their speaking counterparts, i.e. non-native speakers of English talking about Engineering through SCMC media, as Nunan (2015) inferred speaking accuracy as an extent to which language learners use appropriate vocabulary and grammar with intelligible pronunciation when they speak in the target language.

1.7. Thesis Organization

The study is included in five chapters those are: Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methodology, Results and Discussion, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations.

⑩ Chapter I presents general contents including the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, scope of the study, significances of the study, definition of key terms, and organization of the thesis.

⑩ Chapter II provides a literature review involving related theories and previous research with the study.

⑩ Chapter III explains the research methodology including research design, research setting and participants, data collection, and data analysis.

⑩ Chapter IV reports the results and discussion of the study.

⑩ Chapter V includes conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

1.8. Concluding Remarks

This chapter explains this study's introductory part by providing this study: background; research questions; objectives; scope; significance; definition of key terms; and thesis organization. The next following chapter reviews the relevant literature of this study that covers: the notion of Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) in an English-speaking classroom; oral interaction through SCMC; and the roles and effects of SCMC on learners' speaking skills.