University of Zawia-Faculty of Arts Journal (UZFAJ)
Volume 26, Issue 1, (2026), pp.1-09, ISSN: 2521-9235

Exploring Teacher Questioning Strategies in the EFL Classroom: A Case Study at University of Zawia

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Received 12 /10 /2025 | Accepted 20 /12 /2025 | Available online 28 / 02 /2026 | DOI: 10.26629/uzfaj.2026.01

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates teacher questioning strategies in EFL classrooms at University of Zawia, aiming to identify question types and techniques that enhance student participation and language development. Data were collected through classroom observations supported by audio recordings, involving two English instructors and twenty undergraduate students. Teacher questions were coded at two levels: as display or referential, and according to techniques including prompting, probing, repetition, redirecting, and wait time.

Addressing a notable research gap, this study examines how instructors in Libyan higher education strategically employ questioning to foster engagement and communicative competence. Results showed that display questions constituted 72% of all teacher questions, while referential questions accounted for 28%. Display questions predominated in comprehension-focused activities, whereas referential questions were more frequent in speaking tasks requiring extended, meaningful responses. Prompting and repetition were the most commonly used techniques, while probing and redirecting were less frequent. Effective use of wait time and constructive feedback consistently supported student engagement.

These findings indicate that a balanced and purposeful use of display and referential questions, combined with strategic techniques, can improve EFL learning outcomes. The study provides practical implications for teacher training and curriculum design in the context of Libyan higher education.

Keywords: teacher questioning, displa vs. referential questions, questioning techniques, EFL, University of Zawia.

استكشاف استراتيجيات طرح الأسئلة لدى المعلم في صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: دراسة حالة في جامعة الزاوية

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تاريخ الاستلام:2025/10/12 تاريخ القبول:2025/12/20 تاريخ النشر: 2026/02/28

ملخَّص البحث

تستقصي هذه الدراسة النوعية استراتيجيات طرح الأسئلة من قبل المعلمين في صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة الزاوية، وتهدف إلى تحديد أنواع الأسئلة والتقنيات التي تُعزز مشاركة الطلاب وتطوير مهاراتهم اللغوية. تم جمع البيانات من خلال ملاحظات الصفوف مدعومة بالتسجيلات الصوتية، بمشاركة معلمين اثنين للغة الإنجليزية وعشرين طالباً جامعياً. تم ترميز أسئلة المعلمين على مستويين: كـ "أسئلة عرضية" أو "أسئلة استقصائية"، وكذلك وفقاً للتقنيات المستخدمة، بما في ذلك التحفيز، الاستقصاء، التكرار، إعادة التوجيه، ووقت الانتظار.

تعالج الدراسة فجوة بحثية ملحوظة، إذ تركز على كيفية استخدام المعلمين في التعليم العالي الليبي لاستراتيجيات طرح الأسئلة لتعزيز المشاركة والكفاءة التواصلية لدى الطلاب. أظهرت النتائج أن الأسئلة العرضية شكلت 72% من إجمالي أسئلة المعلمين، بينما شكلت الأسئلة الاستقصائية 28%. وظهرت الأسئلة العرضية بشكل أكبر في الأنشطة المرتكزة على الفهم، في حين كانت الأسئلة الاستقصائية أكثر شيوعاً في الأنشطة الشفوية التي تتطلب إجابات ممتدة وذات معنى. وكانت تقنيتا التحفيز والتكرار الأكثر استخداماً، في حين كانت تقنيتا الاستقصاء وإعادة التوجيه أقل شيوعاً. وساهم الاستخدام الفعّال لوقت الانتظار والتغذية الراجعة البناءة في تعزيز تفاعل الطلاب بشكل مستمر.

تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن الاستخدام المتوازن والمقصود للأسئلة العرضية والاستقصائية، مع التقنيات الاستراتيجية، يمكن أن يحسن نتائج تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وتقدم الدراسة دلالات عملية لتدريب المعلمين وتصميم المناهج ضمن سياق التعليم العالي الليبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات، الأسئلة، المعلمين، اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة الزاوية.

Introduction

Educators play an essential role in guiding students throughout their educational journeys (Sun, 2012). In the teaching process, assessing students' comprehension, stimulating engagement, and managing participation are integral to effective instruction. Therefore, educators need to carefully plan strategies aligned with lesson goals and learners' needs. According to Sasikumar (2014), effective strategy use enhances learning efficiency and self-regulation. Further, Abulhul (2021) emphasized that instructional strategies foster intellectual curiosity and academic growth.

Among these strategies, questioning stands as one of the most powerful tools, as it directly influences cognitive engagement and communicative interaction (Chin, 2004; Wangru, 2016). Rahman and Mahmud (2016) noted that well-structured questioning creates meaningful dialogue between teachers and students. As Inan and Fidan (in Prasetyawati, 2015) observed, questioning stimulates learning, supports knowledge acquisition, and strengthens critical thinking. Consequently, the ways educators' structure and deliver questions significantly affect classroom discourse and students' construction of meaning (Chin, 2007).

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, questioning is particularly crucial for fostering participation and communicative competence. Recent studies in EFL settings have mapped common questioning patterns. Erianti (2017) identified procedural, display, and referential questions, noting alignment with students' ability levels. Similarly, Sujariati et al. (2016) reported the prevalence of open/closed and display questions and linked them to increased engagement. Significance of the Study Questioning strategies are widely recognized as essential tools for fostering cognitive engagement, communicative competence, and critical thinking (Chin, 2004; Wangru, 2016). Despite extensive research on teacher questioning globally, limited attention has been paid to how Libyan university instructors employ questioning strategies to stimulate participation and enhance learning—particularly at University of Zawia. Investigating these practices offers insights into culturally and institutionally shaped pedagogical approaches and can inform professional development efforts aimed at improving EFL teaching effectiveness.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of questions used by EFL educators at University of Zawia.
2. To examine the questioning techniques employed during classroom interactions.
3. To explore the relationship between teacher questioning strategies and student participation.
4. To provide pedagogical recommendations for enhancing questioning practices in EFL contexts.

Research Questions

1. What types of questions are most frequently used by EFL educators at University of Zawia?
2. What questioning techniques are employed to facilitate student engagement and participation?
3. How do questioning strategies influence classroom interaction and language learning?

Literature Review

Definition of Teacher Questioning Strategy

A questioning strategy is a structured approach teachers use to facilitate student learning and thinking (Guest, 1985, as cited in Erianti et al., 2017). Its effectiveness depends on planning and alignment between question type and instructional objectives (Harvey, 2000, in Sujariati, 2016). Through questioning, teachers assess understanding while enabling students to clarify concepts and articulate ideas (Fries Gather, 2008).

Functions of Educator Questions

Educator questions help focus attention, sustain participation, and advance the lesson (Shomoossi, 2004). Reasons for asking questions include: (a) stimulating and maintaining interest; (b) focusing attention; (c) clarifying student responses; (d) eliciting target forms or vocabulary; (e) checking understanding; (f) encouraging participation (Richards & Lockhart, as cited in Kurniawan, 2011).

Types of Questions

Educators commonly use display questions (the teacher knows the answer; used to check knowledge or forms) and referential questions (the teacher does not know the answer; used to elicit personal/extended responses) (Long & Sato, 1983; Kurniawan, 2011). Lower-level recall questions support accuracy checks, whereas higher-order, open questions promote critical and creative thinking (Tamas & Wang, 2017).

Timing and Implications

Questions can be effective before a lesson (activate prior knowledge, set purposes), during instruction (monitor comprehension; guide transitions), and after instruction (evaluate understanding; reflect on learning) (Durkin, 1979; Pressley et al., 1998; Eble, 1988).

Questioning Techniques

Effective questioning requires clarity, balance, and adaptability (Narwasti, 2015; Eggen & Kauchak, 2006). Techniques include:

1. Prompting: providing hints, examples, or cues to guide responses
2. Probing: encouraging elaboration and reasoning
3. Repetition: reinforcing understanding
4. Redirecting: involving peers to clarify answers
5. Wait time: allowing students processing time and reflection
6. These techniques enhance cognitive engagement, encourage participation, and support the development of higher-order thinking skills.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1- Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978)

Learning occurs through social interaction and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Teacher questioning mediates learning by providing support, prompts, and scaffolding for student responses.

2- Constructivist Theory (Piaget, 1970; Bruner, 1961)

Knowledge is actively constructed by learners through interaction and reflection. Referential and probing questions encourage students to co-construct understanding.

3- Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Provides a cognitive framework for aligning question types with learning objectives. Display questions support lower-order cognitive processes, while referential questions and probing support higher-order thinking.

Relevance to the present study: These theories explain how educator questioning shapes participation, scaffolding, and cognitive engagement in EFL classrooms. Analyzing question types and techniques through these frameworks strengthens the study's pedagogical and theoretical significance.

Methodology

Research Design This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the types of questions and questioning techniques used by EFL instructors at University of Zawia. A case

study is appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of naturally occurring classroom interaction and pedagogical decision-making within a real educational context.

Participants

Participants included two EFL instructors and twenty undergraduate students enrolled in English language courses. The instructors were purposefully selected based on their teaching experience and their involvement in interactive, discussion-based lessons. Students were selected through convenience sampling, as they were the natural participants in the observed classes. All participants provided informed consent.

Data Collection Method

A single-method approach—systematic classroom observation—was used to collect data. Each instructor was observed during three separate lessons (45–60 minutes each). Classroom observation allowed direct examination of question types, questioning techniques, and learner responses during real-time instruction.

To enhance accuracy and ensure a complete record of interaction, audio recordings were used as a supportive tool. The recordings captured the full dialogue, ensuring that no educator questions or student responses were missed during analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed two main stages. First, the classroom data were coded according to question type, distinguishing between display and referential questions. Second, the data were further coded by questioning techniques, including prompting, probing, repetition, redirecting, wait time. Observation notes, audio recordings, and verbatim transcripts worked together to ensure accuracy through within the classroom observation method. The coded data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring patterns in questioning practices. Descriptive frequency counts were also calculated to illustrate how often different question types and techniques occurred.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored. The study-maintained transparency and integrity in data handling and research reporting.

Results

Types of Teacher Questions

Analysis of the classroom observations revealed two primary types of questions used by the instructors: display questions and referential questions. Display questions were considerably more common, serving primarily to check comprehension, confirm factual knowledge, and guide lesson progression. Referential questions, although less frequent, were used strategically during speaking activities to encourage students to express personal opinions, provide explanations, and engage in extended responses. These questions typically generated longer and more meaningful interaction.

Table 1. Types of Teacher Questions

Type of question	Number of Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Display	18	72
Referential	7	28
Total	25	100

These results indicate a strong preference for display questions in routine classroom management and comprehension checks, while referential questions were selectively employed to promote communicative language use.

Questioning Techniques

The analysis also examined the questioning techniques employed by instructors. Five key techniques were identified: prompting, repetition, probing, redirecting, and wait time.

Prompting was the most frequently used technique, often appearing after students hesitated or struggled to respond. Repetition served to reinforce understanding or clarify questions, while probing encouraged students to elaborate or justify their responses. Redirecting, although used less frequently, promoted peer interaction by directing a question or response to another student. Wait time was consistently applied and facilitated student processing and participation.

Table 2. Questioning Techniques Observed Relationship Between Questioning and Student Participation

Technique	Number of Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Prompting	10	**40**
Repetition	7	28
Probing	5	20
Redirecting	3	12
Total	25	100

Patterns across the observations indicated a clear relationship between questioning strategies and student participation:

Display questions typically elicited brief, accuracy-focused responses, often one-word or short phrases. Referential questions, in contrast, encouraged longer and more meaningful responses, contributing to richer interaction and opportunities for language production. Probing and wait time were particularly effective in facilitating deeper student engagement, allowing learners to reflect and expand on their initial answers. Redirecting fostered peer interaction, although it was used minimally.

Overall, the use of questioning strategies—especially referential questions supported by probing and wait time—had a noticeable positive influence on student participation and the quality of classroom discourse.

Discussion

Types of Teachers Questions The findings indicate that display questions (72%) were used far more frequently than referential questions (28%). This aligns with patterns in many EFL classrooms where teacher-centered interaction predominates (Yang, 2010; Erlinda, 2014). Display questions typically check factual knowledge or linguistic accuracy (Long & Sato, 1983), reflecting teachers' efforts to maintain content control and comprehension monitoring. Referential questions, though less frequent, promoted communicative competence, longer responses, and learner reflection (Brock, 1986; Shomoossi, 2004; Nunan, 2015). Their strategic use in speaking tasks demonstrates teachers' awareness of the value of eliciting authentic language and higher-order thinking. According to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, display questions target lower-order cognitive skills (remembering, understanding), whereas referential questions stimulate higher-order thinking (analyzing, evaluating, creating) (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). From a Vygotskian perspective, referential questions scaffold students'

cognitive growth within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), promoting independent reasoning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Further, Constructivist theory supports these questions as tools for co-constructing knowledge through dialogue (Bruner, 1961; Piaget, 1970).

Questioning Techniques.

Prompting (40%) and repetition (28%) were the most commonly used techniques. Prompting provides hints and cues to guide responses, while repetition reinforces understanding and ensures clarity (Walsh, 2011). Probing (20%), though less frequent, effectively encouraged elaboration, reasoning, and deeper engagement (Chin, 2007). Redirecting (12%) was rarely used, reflecting limited multi-directional classroom interaction (Boyd & Markarian, 2015). Wait time was consistently applied, allowing learners to process questions and respond thoughtfully, consistent with Rowe's (1986) findings on its importance in promoting meaningful participation.

Integrative Analysis

A clear interaction emerged between question type and technique. Display questions corresponding with prompting and repetition reinforced comprehension and accuracy, while referential questions combined with probing and wait time encouraged reflective, extended responses. These patterns are theoretically consistent:

1. Sociocultural Theory: Prompting, probing, and redirecting act as scaffolds within learners' ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).
2. Constructivist Theory: Referential questions facilitate co-construction of meaning (Bruner, 1961; Piaget, 1970).
3. Bloom's Taxonomy: The predominance of lower-order questions indicates potential for increasing higher-order questioning to enhance critical thinking and problem-solving.

Conclusion

Educator questioning is a central component of effective EFL instruction, influencing engagement, language development, and critical thinking. Display questions dominated classroom interactions, supporting comprehension and accuracy, while referential questions, supported by techniques such as probing and wait time, facilitated extended and reflective responses.

The findings highlight the interplay between question types and techniques and their alignment with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Constructivist principles, and Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. The study maintained full ethical compliance, ensuring integrity in research design, ethical practice in participant support and coaching, and transparency in funding management. Thus, these results provide practical guidance for improving questioning practices, enhancing student engagement, and developing higher-order thinking skills in Libyan EFL classrooms.

Recommendations

1. Increase Referential and Higher-Order Questions: Integrate more questions that stimulate critical thinking and authentic communication.
2. Enhance Teacher Training and Professional Development: Focus on probing, redirecting, and managing wait time to scaffold learning effectively.
3. Promote Reflective Teaching Practices: Use self-reflection, peer observation, and video analysis to evaluate and refine questioning strategies.
4. Integrate Questioning into Curriculum and Assessment: Embed tasks that align with learning objectives and assessment criteria to foster both linguistic proficiency and higher-order thinking.

5. Support Interactive and Learner-Centered Classrooms: Encourage collaborative dialogue and peer interaction, reducing teacher-dominated discourse.
6. Maintain Ethical and Transparent Practices: Uphold ethical standards in classroom research, participant support, and funding management to ensure integrity and trustworthiness.

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