

Beyond display and referential questions: Teacher questioning as contingent scaffolding in Indonesian EFL reading instruction

ABSTRACT - Teacher questioning plays a pivotal role in shaping classroom interaction and fostering cognitive engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This qualitative multiple-case study investigates how Indonesian university EFL instructors employ questioning practices in reading comprehension courses, focusing on question types, interactional strategies, and their influence on student responses. Grounded in cognitive engagement theory and classroom discourse analysis, data were collected through non-participant classroom observations, audio-visual recordings, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with two instructors at the Language Center of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang. A total of 412 question–response units were analyzed using thematic coding and descriptive frequency analysis. The findings reveal a predominance of display questions, whereas referential and procedural questions occurred less frequently. However, referential and probing questions generated longer, more inferential, and cognitively elaborated student responses. Translation, repetition, and strategic pausing emerged as core scaffolding strategies that mediated comprehension and participation. The study demonstrates that effective questioning resides not merely in the proportion of display versus referential questions, but rather in their strategic sequencing and adaptive modification according to learners' proficiency levels and classroom dynamics. By highlighting the dialogic and scaffolding functions of teacher questioning, this research contributes to classroom discourse scholarship and offers practical implications for fostering balanced, cognitively engaging reading instruction in EFL higher education contexts.

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1. Introduction

Questioning is a fundamental teaching skill and an essential component of the learning process. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, teachers' questions do more than simply elicit responses; they help students comprehend language, promote interaction, and stimulate deeper cognitive engagement (Walsh, 2011). Through questioning, learners are given opportunities to negotiate meaning, activate prior knowledge, and construct new understanding, both linguistic and conceptual (Y. Wang & Lee, 2021). This function is particularly important in reading comprehension, where effective questions bridge textual information and learners' interpretation, guiding students from identifying explicit information to making inferences and engaging in critical analysis (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

In many Asian EFL classrooms, particularly in Indonesia, teacher questioning is widely used as an instructional strategy but remains relatively understudied in terms of its role in promoting active learning. Such questions often function primarily to verify students' understanding rather than to encourage deeper analysis or evaluation, and classroom discourse in these contexts tends to be teacher-centered (Hamied & Kuswandono, 2022). This pattern may restrict students' opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills, an issue of particular concern in reading courses aimed at fostering critical literacy (Rahmawati et al., 2023). Nevertheless, shifts toward communicative and interactive pedagogies have generated renewed interest in how a more balanced approach to questioning can simultaneously strengthen students' language proficiency and cognitive development (J. Kim & Han, 2022). To get this purpose, two types of questions are commonly used; display and referential questions. Display questions, to which the teacher already knows the answer, typically assess recall and basic comprehension. In contrast, referential questions, which seek new information, are more likely to prompt reasoning, elaboration, and authentic communication (Lee, 2016). Both types can enhance classroom engagement when used purposefully. However, determining the appropriate balance between these question types remains a major concern in EFL pedagogy (Mena, 2024; Rahimi & Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, to accommodate students' language proficiency and sustain participation, instructors frequently employ practical strategies such as translation, repetition, and strategic pausing (Smith & King, 2024; Zuo & Walsh, 2023).

Although teacher questioning has been widely examined in general EFL contexts (e.g. Awawda, 2026; Kim & Han, 2022; Rahimi & Zhang, 2021; Walsh & Sert, 2019), considerably less attention has been paid to how instructors employ questioning in Indonesian university reading courses. While Suherdi (2020) and Hamied and Kuswandono (2022) have examined general classroom discourse patterns in Indonesian EFL, their focus was not specifically on reading comprehension or on the strategic sequencing of display and referential questions. At the same time, reading comprehension is central to academic success for EFL university students. Thus, it is important to examine how teachers use questions to guide comprehension and foster active classroom interaction. Investigating this context can offer valuable insights for Indonesian pedagogy while also contributing to broader discussions of effective classroom discourse in multilingual learning environments. Therefore, this study aims to investigate:

1. The types of questions EFL instructors use in reading comprehension courses.

2. The strategies they employ to engage students and facilitate understanding.
3. How different question types shape the nature of interaction between teachers and students.

By investigating these areas, this study seeks to make a dual contribution: it aims to advance theoretical perspectives on discourse in EFL classrooms while providing practical insights that can enhance teachers' questioning skills. Unlike previous studies that have focused primarily on question frequency or have examined speaking/grammar instruction, this study contributes by (a) analyzing the strategic sequencing of display and referential questions in reading contexts, (b) quantifying wait time and response length as indicators of cognitive engagement, and (c) integrating translanguaging theory to explain the role of L1 in teacher questioning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher questioning in EFL classrooms

Teacher questioning has long been recognized as a key element of effective pedagogy and interactional management in language classrooms (Yang, 2021; Yang & Yin, 2022). Boyd (2015) argues that questions serve several important instructional functions: they enable students to produce language, check understanding, direct attention, and stimulate critical thinking. In EFL settings, where students' language proficiency levels often vary considerably, the types and sequencing of teacher questions significantly influence the extent of student participation and the development of classroom interaction (Moorhouse et al., 2022; Yang, 2021).

A primary distinction in the literature is between display and referential questions. Teachers use display questions, such as "What is the main idea of this paragraph?", to check comprehension of information whose answer they already know. In contrast, referential questions, such as "How do you relate this story to your own experience?"—invite students to share personal opinions, interpretations, or experiences (Y.-A. Lee, 2006; Yang, 2021).

Beyond the display/referential distinction, teacher questions can be categorized according to cognitive demand using Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), ranging from lower-order (remember, understand) to higher-order (apply, analyze, evaluate, create). Research indicates that display questions are particularly prevalent in many Asian educational contexts, a pattern often associated with cultural and institutional values that emphasize accuracy and teacher authority (Kim & Han, 2022; Lee, 2016). This pattern is also evident in the Indonesian context. Sundari (2017), in a grounded theory study of twenty experienced EFL teachers across eight lower secondary schools in Jakarta, found that teachers predominantly delivered display questions — closed questions to which they already knew the answer — while referential questions remained largely absent from classroom discourse. This predominance of lower-order questioning is further corroborated by Ahmadi and Kurniawan (2020), who analyzed teacher questions in an Indonesian EFL listening course and found that nearly three-quarters of all questions posed operated at the remembering level of Bloom's revised taxonomy, with higher-order questions — such as those requiring analysis or evaluation — accounting for less than ten percent of total classroom questioning. However, this prevalence does not necessarily diminish their pedagogical value. As Morris and Chi (2020) contend, when

used strategically, display questions can effectively establish a foundation of understanding and even guide students toward higher-order thinking.

Recent empirical studies highlight that a strategic balance between question types, rather than the mere frequency of their use, contributes to meaningful classroom interaction. Wang and Lee (2021) demonstrated that teachers who consciously integrated both display and referential questions fostered richer dialogue and observed notable improvements in students' reasoning skills. Similarly, in the Indonesian context, Rahmawati et al. (2023) found that educators who skilfully sequenced question types were able to sustain engagement while accommodating diverse proficiency levels within the same classroom. Accordingly, this study posits that effective questioning is less about privileging one type over another and more about strategically sequencing questions to align with instructional goals.

2.2. Questioning strategies and interactional scaffolding

Effective questioning extends beyond the selection of question types; it also encompasses how questions are delivered. Specific strategies, including repetition, rephrasing, translation, and pausing, are integral to sustaining student engagement. Teachers employ these strategies not only to support reasoning but also to encourage participation. Repetition reinforces key ideas, while a strategic pause, often referred to as “break time”, provides students with the opportunity to process information before responding (Kater, 2024; Smith & King, 2024). Similarly, although translation is sometimes debated within communicative pedagogy, it offers practical scaffolding by bridging linguistic gaps that may hinder comprehension in multilingual classrooms (Nguyen, 2020).

According to Moorhouse et al. (2022), such questioning strategies are central to what classroom discourse research identifies as teachers' interactional competence. This competence is reflected in the ability to manage the flow of talk (e.g., turn-taking), repair misunderstandings, and adjust language in response to learners' immediate needs. By employing these strategies, teachers can create a more supportive interactional environment that facilitates student participation, particularly during cognitively demanding tasks such as reading comprehension.

2.3. Questioning and reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is a complex process that requires both foundational reasoning and deeper interpretation of meaning. Within this process, teacher questioning plays a crucial supportive role. Drawing on cognitive and schema theories of reading, comprehension develops when learners connect new information with prior knowledge and actively construct meaning from the text (Vettori et al., 2024). Teacher questions facilitate this meaning-making process by directing students' attention to key aspects of the text and encouraging them to move beyond surface-level understanding toward inference and interpretation (Yang, 2021).

Research in EFL reading contexts has demonstrated that strategically designed questions can enhance both the comprehension of explicit information and the ability to infer meaning (M. Kim, 2023; Liu, 2021). Referential questions tend to prompt students to generate inferences and elaborate their ideas, whereas display questions are effective for reinforcing understanding of

explicit textual details. Consequently, effective teachers often organize questions sequentially, beginning with basic comprehension checks and gradually guiding students toward more analytical and interpretive discussion (Rahmawati et al., 2023).

2.4. Theoretical framework: Cognitive engagement and classroom discourse

2.4.1. Cognitive engagement theory

Cognitive engagement theory provides a foundational lens through which this study examines how teacher questioning influences student learning in EFL classrooms. Engagement, as conceptualized by Fredricks et al. (2016), is a multidimensional construct encompassing *behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions*. First, *behavioral* engagement refers to students' observable participation in learning activities, such as answering questions, completing tasks, and attending to instruction. Second, *emotional* engagement captures students' affective responses to the classroom environment, including their sense of belonging, interest, and motivation. *Third*, cognitive engagement, the most complex dimension, involves the deliberate mental effort students invest in understanding, processing, and constructing knowledge — encompassing strategies such as self-monitoring, elaboration, and critical reflection. Critically, these three dimensions do not operate in isolation; rather, they are deeply interdependent, with gains or deficits in one dimension frequently influencing the others (Fredricks et al., 2016).

In the context of EFL classrooms, teacher questioning serves as a primary mechanism through which all three dimensions of engagement can be simultaneously activated. Display questions, for instance, may sustain behavioral engagement by keeping students attentive and on-task, while referential and higher-order questions have the potential to stimulate cognitive engagement by requiring students to move beyond simple recall toward interpretation, analysis, and evaluation (Yang, 2021). Furthermore, the inclusive and dialogic nature of effective questioning can foster emotional engagement by signalling to students that their contributions are valued and that the classroom is a safe space for intellectual risk-taking (Hennessy et al., 2023; Sedova et al., 2019). By drawing on cognitive engagement theory, this study is therefore positioned to examine not merely whether students respond to teacher questions, but the depth and quality of the cognitive work those responses demand.

2.4.2. Classroom discourse analysis

Complementing cognitive engagement theory, classroom discourse analysis offers both a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding how teacher talk — and teacher questioning in particular — shapes the interactional architecture of learning. Rooted in the tradition of systemic functional linguistics and conversation analysis, classroom discourse analysis treats language not simply as a medium of instruction but as the primary site where knowledge is constructed, negotiated, and contested between teachers and students (Walsh, 2011). Central to this framework is the recognition that talk in classrooms is fundamentally asymmetrical: teachers typically control the allocation of turns, determine which topics are pursued, and evaluate the adequacy of student responses. This asymmetry is most clearly visible in the initiation–response–feedback (IRF) exchange structure, which continues to characterize

classroom interaction but is increasingly understood as a dynamic and evolving interactional pattern shaped by teacher questioning practices and pedagogical decision-making (Nazari et al., 2026). Then, within the IRF structure, teacher questions function as initiating moves that constrain or expand the conversational space available to students; a closed display question typically produces a brief, predictable response, while an open referential question creates greater opportunity for student voice, extended discourse, and genuine meaning-making (Walsh, 2011). Classroom discourse analysis thus enables researchers to examine not only the linguistic features of teacher questions — their syntactic form, lexical choices, and cognitive demands — but also their sequential positioning, the interactional consequences they generate, and the broader pedagogical functions they serve across different phases of a lesson.

2.4.3. Integration of cognitive engagement and classroom discourse frameworks

Taken together, cognitive engagement theory and classroom discourse analysis offer complementary and mutually reinforcing perspectives on the relationship between teacher questioning and student learning. While cognitive engagement theory illuminates the internal processes that effective questioning is intended to activate—directing attention, deepening understanding, and sustaining intellectual effort—classroom discourse analysis reveals the interactional mechanisms through which those processes are socially mediated and made visible in classroom talk. This integrated theoretical framework therefore enables the present study to move beyond a purely descriptive account of question types toward a richer, more explanatory understanding of how specific questioning practices shape the conditions for learning in Indonesian EFL classrooms. By combining these two frameworks, the research aims not only to document the types and frequencies of questions teachers use, but to interpret those practices in terms of their capacity to foster genuine cognitive engagement and to create classroom discourse environments in which students are positioned as active, thinking participants rather than passive recipients of transmitted knowledge.

Further, grounded in the principle of cognitive engagement theory and classroom discourse analysis, this research explores the interconnectedness of learning and interaction. Cognitive engagement theory suggests that meaningfulness takes place when students are actively involved in learning activities at behavioral, emotional, and cognitive levels (Fredricks et al., 2016). However, cognitive engagement theory has been criticized for its reliance on behavioral indicators (e.g., time on task, response length) as proxies for cognitive processes, without direct measurement of learners' thinking (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Zhou, 2024). This study addresses this limitation by triangulating observational data with teacher interviews about their pedagogical intentions.

In classroom settings, teacher questioning can stimulate cognitive engagement by encouraging students to think critically and construct ideas. At the same time, questioning practices can support emotional engagement by creating interactive, inclusive, and supportive classroom interactions (Hennessy et al., 2023; Sedova et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, classroom discourse analysis provides a methodological and conceptual framework for examining how teachers talk shapes student participation (Walsh, 2011). From

this point of view, teacher questions are understood as discursive actions to contribute to the co-construction of learning opportunities in classrooms. By combining these principles, the research aims not only to examine the types of questions used by the teachers, but also how these questions help students engage and understand the text in a real classroom environment.

2.5. Research gap and rationale

Although teacher talk has been extensively examined in EFL research, the ways in which questioning operates at both interactional and cognitive levels in Indonesian EFL reading classrooms, particularly within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, remain underexplored. Much of the existing scholarship has concentrated on speaking and grammar instruction, whereas classroom interaction during reading activities has received comparatively limited attention. As a result, less is known about how teachers' questions function not only to manage discourse but also to stimulate cognitive engagement during text-based learning. Furthermore, studies in this area rarely (Morris & Chi, 2020; Suherdi, 2020; Yang, 2021) integrate qualitative classroom discourse analysis with perspectives on cognitive engagement, thereby leaving an important conceptual and methodological gap in the literature.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how Indonesian EFL teachers employ various question types and questioning strategies in reading comprehension classrooms. By analyzing both the forms and functions of teacher questions, the study conceptualizes questioning as a dynamic pedagogical practice that extends beyond comprehension checking. Instead, it positions questioning as a dialogic and scaffolded process through which teachers guide interaction, mediate understanding, and create opportunities for deeper meaning-making in ESP reading contexts (Morris & Chi, 2020).

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative classroom discourse approach using a multiple case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this approach was to gain an in-depth understanding of how EFL instructors design and implement questioning practices in reading comprehension lessons, as well as how these practices shape classroom interaction and students' comprehension processes. The use of multiple case studies enabled cross-case comparison between two teachers, allowing for the identification of shared patterns as well as distinctive features in their questioning strategies. A focused two-teacher design demonstrates to yield sufficient data for meaningful pattern identification, particularly when each case is documented across multiple classroom sessions and triangulated through multiple data sources such as observations and interviews (Hennessy et al., 2023; Sedova et al., 2019; Walsh & Sert, 2019). In the present study, the two participating teachers were selected to represent contextually comparable yet individually distinct instructional profiles — sharing the same institutional level and subject matter focus while differing in teaching experience and questioning repertoires — thereby maximizing the analytical contrast necessary for a productive cross-case comparison (Miles et al., 2020).

The research examined naturally occurring classroom interactions through non-participant observation, complemented by semi-structured interviews. This triangulated qualitative methodology facilitated the development of rich and detailed accounts of teachers' questioning strategies and their instructional intentions (Denzim & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative design was deemed appropriate because the study sought to explore underlying meanings, pedagogical rationales, and interactional dynamics rather than to measure predetermined variables quantitatively.

3.2. Context of the study

This study was conducted at the Language Center of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, a private university located in East Java Province, Indonesia. Each semester, the Language Center provides instructional services to approximately 2,000 undergraduate students through a mandatory English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program that focuses on reading comprehension and academic literacy. Although the program officially promotes a communicative approach, classroom practices often remain teacher-centered, reflecting pedagogical patterns commonly observed in EFL contexts across Asia (Hamied & Kuswando, 2022).

Each observed class consisted of 20–25 students, the majority of whom were first-year undergraduates from economics, business, and engineering programs. Based on institutional placement tests, students' English proficiency levels ranged from A2 to B1 on the CEFR scale. The classrooms were equipped with standard instructional facilities, including multimedia projectors, whiteboards, and audio equipment.

3.3. Participants

This study involved two experienced EFL instructors, referred to here as Teacher A and Teacher B. Both taught Reading Comprehension I and II in the same semester.

- Teacher A held a master's degree in TESOL, had 12 years of teaching experience, and was recognized with a clear and structured instructional teaching approach.
- Teacher B held a master's in applied Linguistics, had 9 years of teaching experience, and emphasized interaction and discussion teaching styles.

Prior to data collection, both instructors were officially informed of consent and provided ethical clearance from the university's research ethics board (Ref: UMM/LC/2024/042). Students were informed of the research objectives, assured of their confidentiality, and given the option to withdraw at any time. All names and identifiable details in transcripts were anonymized.

3.4. Data collection procedures

3.4.1. Classroom observation

Each teacher underwent six observation sessions, which equal to 12 classroom meetings across an eight-week period. Each session lasted 90 minutes. Observations were video- and

audio-recorded, and the researcher also took detailed records focusing on classroom situation, questioning moments, and student responses.

Observation data focused on the following:

- Types of questions (display, referential, procedural)
- Question forms (open/closed, wh-/yes-no)
- Questioning strategies (translation, repetition, pausing, probing, rephrasing)
- Student responses (length, complexity, and engagement indicators)

3.4.2. Interviews

Both teachers conducted semi-structured interviews after each observation (each teacher had 2 interviews which lasted for 45-60 minutes respectively). The interviews were using English and Indonesian alternately to keep the clarity and confidence. The following are sample prompting questions:

- “What considerations do you have when you use either English or Indonesian to ask questions?”
- “What makes you decide when to repeat or rephrase a question??”
- “What do you expect from students by using different types of questions??”
- This study recorded interviews for transcription and thematic analysis, which further specified questioning practices applied by the teachers.

3.4.3. Transcription and data management

This study transcribed all recordings verbatim while maintaining code-switching between English and Indonesian and adding English explanations for some citations. Further, this study formatted transcriptions with timestamps and coded them using NVivo 14 software for thematic categorization.

3.5. Data analysis

This study followed the interactive model from Miles et al. (2020) for the data analysis, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

1. Data Reduction: This study grouped initial transcripts based on “question-response units”, where each question is answered by one or more students.
2. Coding Scheme: This study developed a coding system that consists of two stages.
 - Stage 1: Type of question (Display, Referential, Procedural)
 - Stage 2: Strategy and modification (Translation, Repetition, Pause, Probing, Rephrasing)

In this stage, question form (open and closed) and response type (short factual, elaborated explanation, opinion, clarification, and silence) were assigned subcodes.
3. Inter-Rater Reliability: 20% data in this study were analysed independently by a second trained coder. Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was $\kappa = .86$, indicating high reliability.
4. Data Display and Quantification: This study used descriptive frequencies to describe the distribution patterns among categories despite its qualitative nature (Miles et al., 2020).

3.6. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

This study utilized the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (2018) to ensure its credibility:

- Credibility results from continuous classroom engagement, triangulation (observation, interview, data records), and member checking with participants.
- This study ensures its transferability by using detailed context-based descriptions to investigate how it is applied in similar EFL contexts.
- Dependability and Confirmability: The data in this study were analyzed by two external TESOL experts through auditing and peer discussions. While ethical practices covered the information-based agreement, voluntary participation, and data pseudonymization, maintaining confidentiality of any sensitive information in accordance with institutional recording guidelines.

4. Findings

This section presents study's findings based on the research questions, data citation, and descriptive tables. This study has proven that there are different patterns in question types, questioning strategies, and the relationship between teacher questions and student responses.

4.1. Types and forms of teacher questions

412 teacher questions were identified from a 12-session observation. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of question types.

Table 1

Distribution of teacher question types.

Question Type	Teacher A	Teacher B	Total	Percentage
Display	132	118	250	60.7%
Referential	51	48	99	24.0%
Procedural/Managerial	36	27	63	15.3%
Total	219	193	412	100%

The above table shows that display questions dominated all question types (61%). Thus, it aligns with prior literature on comprehension checks in Asian EFL classrooms (J. Kim & Han, 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2023). Although less frequent, referential questions were significant at stages that require interpretation or personal connection to the text.

Excerpt 1: Display Question Example

Teacher A: "What is the main idea of paragraph three?"

Student: "It is about the importance of teamwork in business."

Teacher A: "Yes, correct. That's the main point."

The above dialog showed that teachers' display questions checked literal comprehension. Although the question was brief, it ensured all students understood the meaning covered by the text.

Excerpt 2: Referential Question Example

Teacher B: “Why do you think the author uses the example of Steve Jobs here?”

Student: “Maybe because he is creative and... it shows innovation.”

Teacher B: “Exactly, that’s one interpretation—creativity and risk-taking.”

The above dialog showed that referential questions caused longer, inferential responses, which shows that open-ended questions foster deeper engagement. Then, there are several practices of referential questions used by the observed teacher as presented in the following interview excerpts:

R : Could you please elaborate on what type of question that is?

Ek : There are various types, clearly quite general ones that are relevant to the topic. With background knowledge, the students were able to answer questions that I asked at the initial stage prior to the reading activity. What is important is that I attempted to stimulate students’ curiosity about what was going to be discussed.

R : How did they react to these questions?

Ek : As we observed earlier, most of them responded to the questions and were engaged. It seemed that they got more enthusiastic, even though there were some students who were less active.

R : On the next stage, what were your questions?

Ek : I usually started with slightly easier questions. The students could discover the answers directly on the reading texts. The answers were indeed provided in the texts. Since they are university students, I think basic questions will not suffice. I came with subsequent inquiries that require interpretation of text. The one that has no specific answers >That is how it works< I often asked such questions...since they are university students.

The interview excerpt above reflects a strategic and staged use of referential questions by the teacher (Ek) to facilitate students’ cognitive engagement during reading instruction. Qualitatively, the data can be interpreted as follows: First, at the pre-reading stage, the teacher (Ek) employed general, topic-related questions aimed at activating students’ prior knowledge. These questions functioned as a form of schema activation, enabling students to connect existing knowledge with upcoming content. Importantly, the teacher explicitly intended to stimulate curiosity, suggesting that questioning was not merely for assessment but also for motivational and engagement purposes. This indicates an awareness of the role of questioning in fostering anticipatory thinking and interest-building. Second, students’ responses to these initial questions were largely positive. Most students participated and showed increased enthusiasm, although some remained less active. This suggests that the questioning strategy was generally effective in promoting engagement, but also highlights learner variability, where not all students are equally responsive. Such variation may point to differences in confidence, proficiency, or learning preferences. Third, during the while-reading stage, the teacher adopted a scaffolded questioning approach. The progression began with lower-order questions (i.e., questions whose answers

could be directly located in the text), which likely served to build students' confidence and ensure comprehension. Subsequently, the teacher moved toward higher-order questions requiring interpretation and critical thinking, including questions without fixed answers (referential questions). This transition reflects alignment with frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy, moving from recall and comprehension to analysis and evaluation. Finally, the teacher's comment that "*basic questions will not suffice*" for university students indicates a pedagogical belief that learners at this level require more cognitively demanding tasks. The frequent use of open-ended, interpretive questions suggests an emphasis on developing critical literacy skills, encouraging students to engage with texts beyond surface-level understanding.

4.2. Questioning strategies

Teachers used several questioning strategies to manage comprehension difficulties and maintain students' participation. The three dominant strategies found in the study were translation, repetition, and pause (break time). Then they are followed by probing and rephrasing as modification techniques.

Table 2

Frequency of questioning strategies.

Strategy/Modification	Teacher A	Teacher B	Total	Percentage
Translation (L1 use)	42	39	81	19.6%
Repetition	37	32	69	16.8%
Pause (break time)	30	28	58	14.1%
Probing	22	20	42	10.2%
Rephrasing	25	19	44	10.7%
Other (prompting, hint)	15	13	28	6.8%
Combined/Sequential	48	42	90	21.8%
Total	219	193	412	100%

Table 2 entails the three most frequent strategies done by Teacher A and Teacher B; consecutively, Combined/Sequential category at 21.8%, Translation (L1 use) at 19.6%, and repetition at 16.8%. It turns out that "Combined/Sequential category is the largest single category.

Excerpt 3: Translation Strategy

Teacher A: "What does the word 'decline' mean? Penurunan, yes?"

(students nod and repeat the word in English)

Teacher A: "Good, so 'decline' means decrease."

Lexical clarification and less affective barriers were the result of translation, particularly when the vocabulary is unknown. Interviews recorded teachers' reports on how translation maintains the lesson's flow and students' comprehension simultaneously

Excerpt 4: Repetition and Pausing

Teacher B: “What does the author suggest about the company’s failure? ... (3.5s pause) ... I repeat—what is the author’s suggestion?”

Student: “He said... um... they must change their marketing strategy.”

Teacher B: “Yes, very good. Wait time helps, right?” (students laugh)

From the above dialog, it was found that the mean break time was 3.7 seconds, similar across question types. Deliberate pauses encouraged more students to answer questions.

4.3. Relationship between question types and student responses

This study categorized student responses according to length and cognitive parameters (Bloom’s taxonomy adapted from Krathwohl, 2002). The following table describes the correlation between the two.

Table 3

Student response patterns by question type.

Question Type	Short Factual	Elaborated	Inferential	Opinion	Silent/No Response
Display	152 (61%)	47 (19%)	18 (7%)	9 (3%)	23 (9%)
Referential	24 (24%)	39 (39%)	27 (27%)	9 (9%)	0 (0%)
Procedural	38 (60%)	8 (13%)	2 (3%)	1 (2%)	14 (22%)

Referential questions consistently cause longer, more inferential questions that support previous findings (J. Lee, 2016; Y. Wang & Lee, 2021). Display questions were brief and focused on accuracy, but also critical for comprehension checking. Additionally, procedural questions, closely related to class management, produced minimal interaction.

4.4. Modifications and interactional effects

Teachers support understanding by frequently modifying the questions; two of the most significant are as follows:

1. Probing for Depth: Sequencing questions to extend thinking.
 - “What is the author’s message?” → “How does that connect to your experience?”
2. Rephrasing for Clarity: Simplifying or providing lexical cues.
 - “What’s the synonym of ‘beneficial’?” → “Can you think of another word that means ‘good for you’?”

Excerpt 5: Probing Example

Teacher A: “So, what did the author argue?”

Student: “That students should read more.”

Teacher A: “Why do you think he said that? What evidence?”

Student: “Because reading helps understand context—he gave examples about habits.”

The above dialog shows that probing shifted a brief factual response into a conversation based on reasoning, which aligns with cognitive engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2016).

4.5. Quantitative summary

Although the study was predominantly qualitative, several quantitative indicators reveal meaningful trends in classroom interaction. The majority of teacher questions were display questions (61%), followed by referential questions (24%), suggesting a greater emphasis on eliciting known information rather than promoting extended discourse. In terms of instructional support, combined or sequential techniques were among the most frequently used (21.8%), alongside translation, which also appeared prominently at 19.6%. Student responses varied considerably depending on question type: display questions resulted in relatively brief answers with a mean length of 6.8 words, whereas inferential questions encouraged more elaborated responses, averaging 18.3 words. Additionally, the average wait time per question was 3.7 seconds, indicating a relatively short pause for student processing. Notably, the use of probing strategies proved effective in enhancing student output, as it led to responses that were approximately 35% longer on average. Collectively, these findings highlight how questioning techniques and instructional supports shape the length and depth of student responses.

4.6. Summary of findings

The findings indicate that display questions dominated the results and served a functional role in checking comprehension, which was a significant factor in reading instruction. Referential questions, which of fewer results, produced richer discourse and cognitive engagement. At the same time, questioning strategies, including combined/sequential, translation, repetition, pausing, and probing, were able to identify adaptive pedagogy adjusted to students' competence. Overall, these results highlight that question quality drives meaningful classroom activities, apart from their quantity.

5. Discussion

This study aims to investigate the types and strategies of questions employed by Indonesian EFL teachers in reading comprehension classrooms and to examine how these practices shape students' responses. This section discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework, while also outlining methodological limitations and pedagogical implications for EFL instruction.

5.1. Dominance of display questions in EFL reading contexts

The findings indicate that display questions predominated, a pattern consistent with research on Asian EFL classrooms that highlights the prevalence of teacher-centered discourse. This tendency aligns with the instructional orientation described by Chin (2019), which emphasizes verifying content knowledge and accuracy rather than promoting open-ended dialogue. Display questions play a practical role in supporting text comprehension, particularly

in classrooms where students' proficiency levels vary considerably, as teachers can guide understanding through questions with predetermined answers.

However, this dominance also reveals a pedagogical tension. While display questions ensure comprehension, their excessive use may limit opportunities for communicative practice and the development of higher-order thinking skills (Rahimi & Zhang, 2021). In contrast, referential questions foster inferential reasoning and collaborative meaning-making (Waring, 2020). From Hennessy et al. (2023) sociocognitive perspective, classroom questioning reflects teachers' underlying beliefs about learning. In this case, reading appears to be approached primarily as decoding meaning rather than co-constructing it. Nevertheless, the presence of referential questions suggests a gradual shift toward a more interactive and dialogic pedagogy.

5.2. Referential questions and cognitive engagement

Although referential questions accounted for only 24% of the total, they demonstrated significant pedagogical value. Students' responses to these questions were longer, more elaborated, and more inferential, consistent with findings by Wang and Lee (2021) and Yang (2021). This pattern also aligns with sociocultural perspectives (Lantolf & Thorne, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasize the role of interaction in cognitive development, particularly when learners are prompted to articulate reasoning or connect ideas to prior experiences.

In practice, teachers tended to introduce referential questions during the interpretive phase of lessons, inviting students to discuss authorial intention, attitudes, and textual implications. These questions encouraged personal reflection and deeper engagement. Interview data further revealed that students found such moments more stimulating because they could express opinions rather than merely recall factual information. This supports (Mercer, 2019) concept of dialogic teaching, in which questioning facilitates collective thinking. When strategically integrated, referential questions can transform reading lessons from monologic recitations into dialogic exchanges.

Nevertheless, the relatively limited use of referential questions reflects institutional and contextual constraints. Large class sizes, time limitations, and examination-oriented curricula make open-ended questioning challenging. Teachers may also hesitate to use such questions due to concerns about classroom management or student reluctance (Nguyen, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires both targeted professional development and systemic curricular reform that prioritizes process-oriented learning.

5.3. Strategic use of combined/sequential, translation, repetition, and pausing

The findings show that combined/sequential strategy reached as high as 21.8%. This is the most frequently used strategy, followed by translation (19.6%), repetition (16.8%), and pausing (14.1%). In other words, they were the three most frequently used questioning strategies observed. These practices, especially the combination of two or more questioning strategies (e.g. translation and repetition), appear to function as adaptive responses to learners' limited proficiency and the bilingual nature of the EFL Reading classes. Translation between English and Indonesian helped ensure comprehension and reduce anxiety. Although communicative

language teaching often promotes an “English-only” approach, research has acknowledged the pedagogical legitimacy of principled L1 use (Hall & Cook, 2018; Macaro, 2022). In this study, translation supported lexical clarification and conceptual understanding, aligning with translanguaging theory (Huang & Chalmers, 2023; Wang & Ai, 2024), which views bilingual practices as resources rather than obstacles.

Repetition reinforced key questions and provided additional processing time, helping students confirm understanding and re-engage attention. This corresponds to Seedhouse (2021) analysis of classroom interaction, which highlights repetition as a mechanism for maintaining shared understanding. Similarly, the observed average wait time of 3.7 seconds reflects awareness of research demonstrating that pauses exceeding three seconds significantly enhance response quality and participation (Hattie & Clarke, 2019; Kater, 2024; Smith & King, 2024). Collectively, these strategies exemplify communicative adaptation (Walsh, 2011), whereby teachers dynamically adjust discourse to learners’ needs. Rather than indicating pedagogical deficiency, the combination of L1 use, repetition, and pause reflects context-sensitive scaffolding in linguistically diverse classrooms.

5.4. *Question Modification: Probing and rephrasing*

The occurrence of modification strategies in the form of probing and rephrasing shows that the teachers attempted to scaffold more comprehension of the students. The probing questions “Why do you think so?” and “Can you explain further?” that provoke initial responses encourage the students to justify answers and engage in reasoning. This finding corresponds to Kilpelä et al. (2023 and Soysal (2024), who identified that probing serves as a trigger to reason scientifically in inquiry-based learning.

Meanwhile, rephrasing helped the teachers to overcome misunderstandings through language simplification or hint provision. This strategy shows the teachers’ interactional ability to customize linguistic input based on the students’ level of comprehension (Walsh, 2011). For instance, the teachers provide familiar words instead of abstract or academic ones to decrease miscommunication.

Both modifications embody the principle of contingent scaffolding (Hammond, 2021; Wood et al., 1976), where teachers fine-tune support according to learners everchanging needs. The iterative pattern “question → student response → probing/rephrasing” resulted in small interactions that established a progressive comprehension.

Nevertheless, the study reported differences between the teachers. Teacher A, with a frequent use of the probing strategy, received more extended and higher-order responses than Teacher B, who tended to apply the rephrasing strategy. It shows that teachers’ method of questioning tends to reflect broader pedagogical orientations (clarity) than procedural choice (exploration).

5.5. *Student responses and interactional outcomes*

In this study, the students have significantly different responses regarding the types of questions. While the display questions are mostly answered with short facts, the referential and

probing ones are responded to with elaborate or inferential answers. This pattern aligns with the revised taxonomy by Bloom (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), indicating that cognitive demand is affected by the type of question.

The positive correlation between question receptivity and response duration corresponds to the previous study by Huang and Chalmers (2023) and Suherdi (2020). Additionally, a more extensive response conforms with a higher level of participation, indicating that referential and probing questions stimulate cognitive engagement and affective involvement. Students are more motivated if their opinions are considered (Fredricks et al., 2016).

Based on the interviews, the students favoured referential questions that provoke interpretation or opinion since the questions allowed them to think rather than memorize in English. Therefore, referential questions which are engaging and have no wrong answers to a personal opinion or experience make students feel safer speaking up leading to zero silent responses, compared to display questions that are often felt like a test, reducing students' participations (Awawda, 2026; Gouider & Ameziane, 2022). Pedagogically, it is crucial that EFL learners desire a chance to communicate authentically despite the reading-focused curriculum.

However, some of the open questions did not work. Occasionally, the students did not respond to the questions, especially the syntactically complex or culturally unfamiliar ones. Therefore, designing effective referential questions highly requires linguistic accessibility and topic relevance (Nguyen, 2020).

5.6. Theoretical integration

The questions provided by the teachers served as mediational tools to guide the students through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The translation and rephrasing strategies were used by the teachers as means of linguistic scaffolding, and the probing and referential questions helped extend cognitive challenges that are adjusted to the student's capability.

Moreover, this study contributes to the classroom discourse theory (Walsh, 2011) by emphasizing dialogic potential of the questions provided by the teachers in the context of EFL. Instead of defining them as two contrasting variables, the data demonstrate display questions as functional progression that secures students' comprehension and referential questions as means to encourage reflection.

5.7. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, since it only involves two teachers at one institution, it is limited in transferability. Future researchers are advised to explore more samples from different areas and levels of education to gain more variety of contexts. Secondly, even though the study applied basic frequency counts, the data were predominantly qualitative. An integration between discourse analysis and qualitative correlation, for example, the correlation between question types and test performance, may result in a more thorough understanding. Thirdly, despite the authentic interaction, the presence of the observer in the classroom might affect the teachers' behavior. This issue could be avoided by longitudinal or covert recordings. Fourth, since there was a disparity between the students' proficiency levels, it might affect the

complexity of the responses. Fifth, student perspectives were not directly solicited. While response length and engagement were observable, students' cognitive and emotional experiences of different question types remain inferential. Future research should incorporate stimulated recall interviews with students to capture their perceptions. Future researchers are also advised to consider the difference to control the effect of the question type on the response quality.

5.8. Pedagogical implications

Several pedagogical implications emerge from this study. First, teachers should diversify question types and adopt a balanced progression from display to referential questioning, adjusting ratios according to proficiency levels. Second, L1 use should be applied strategically for clarification without undermining English exposure, consistent with principled translanguaging (Huang & Chalmers, 2023; F. Wang & Ai, 2024). Third, teachers should intentionally extend wait time to three to five seconds, as recommended by Hattie and Clarke (2019), to enhance response quality. Fourth, professional development programs should emphasize probing and rephrasing techniques to strengthen scaffolding skills. Fifth, specifically, teacher education programs might incorporate video-based reflection tasks where teachers analyze their own wait time and questioning sequences; micro-teaching sessions with peer feedback on probing techniques; and coaching cycles focused on strategic translanguaging. Finally, teachers are encouraged to engage in reflective practice by reviewing classroom recordings to analyze questioning patterns and identify missed opportunities for deeper interaction.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the questioning practices of EFL teachers in Indonesian reading comprehension classrooms and yielded several significant findings. Display questions emerged as the most frequently used type, primarily functioning to verify students' comprehension, whereas referential questions—though less frequent—generated longer, more inferential, and cognitively elaborated responses. Teachers also employed adaptive interactional strategies, including translation, repetition, strategic pausing, probing, and rephrasing, with an average wait time of 3.7 seconds contributing to improved student engagement and response quality. Overall, the observed practices reflect both traditional and evolving pedagogical orientations, as teachers balanced instructional control with interactive engagement responsive to learners' proficiency levels. Theoretically, this study reinforces sociocultural perspectives on scaffolded dialogue and extends classroom discourse theory by demonstrating that effective EFL questioning emerges not from replacing display questions but from strategically integrating them with referential and probing forms, thereby extending Walsh's (2011) concept of classroom interactional competence to reading comprehension in EFL contexts. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of developing teachers' interactional competence, reflective questioning skills, and translanguaging awareness. Consequently, teacher education programs should prioritize training in strategic question sequencing, purposeful wait time, and adaptive scaffolding techniques, while encouraging reflective practice through classroom observation and discourse analysis. Several

limitations warrant acknowledgment, including the study's confinement to two instructors within a single institutional context, limiting generalizability. Future research should therefore expand through comparative studies across language skills or cultural contexts, longitudinal designs examining professional development impacts on questioning practices, and investigations into students' cognitive and emotional responses to different question types. Additionally, studies integrating technology—such as AI-supported discussion platforms or interactive digital tools—could explore questioning cycles in blended or online learning environments, while mixed-methods approaches examining relationships between questioning patterns and measurable learning outcomes would further deepen understanding of the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying effective teacher questioning.

Declaration on the use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly to check grammar and improve sentence clarity. All AI-generated content was reviewed, edited, and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final outputs. No AI tool was used to generate original data or to analyse the results unless explicitly stated.

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