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The Impact of Teacher Questioning Strategies on EFL Learners' Second Turn of the IRF Sequence: A Case Study of Two Saudi Arabian Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of questioning methods employed by Saudi EFL teachers at Yanbu Industrial College (YIC) on student involvement and response behaviours in teacher-centred classes. Classroom observations and audio recordings were analysed qualitatively to examine the impact of various categories of teacher questions—referential versus display and open-ended versus closed-ended—on learner participation, focusing on student responses within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) framework. The findings demonstrate that open-ended and referential questions are essential for enhancing student engagement by fostering deeper thought, prompting comprehensive responses, and promoting meaningful student-teacher interaction. In contrast, closed-ended and display questions often elicit brief replies that limit engagement. However, effective follow-up inquiries, such as "why" or "how," can transform previously closed interactions into opportunities for deeper engagement. The research underscores the importance of integrating open-ended and referential questioning techniques in teacher-centred EFL environments and incorporating them into teacher training and professional development programs to foster active classroom engagement.

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Building upon the traditional IRF model, the study introduces an Extended IRF (E-IRF) framework that directly links question types to the length and complexity of student responses. This conceptual model provides practical guidance for educators to enhance student involvement and interactive discourse in EFL courses, offering actionable strategies for creating more dynamic and engaging learning environments.

Keywords: Teacher Questioning Strategies; EFL Learner Engagement; Open-Ended Questions; Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) Framework; Saudi EFL Classrooms

1. Introduction

The role of EFL learners in classroom interaction is crucial and must be considered by teachers when designing methods of interaction. With this understanding, typically, teachers try to find appropriate methods to support EFL learners to engage in discussions. However, it is evident that the roles of teachers and EFL learners in classrooms are not equal. Teachers are able to control classroom interaction by deciding who will speak or when they will speak [1], and this is even more evident in Saudi classrooms. Teachers' questioning is a primary method used to elicit answers from EFL learners. This approach is particularly prominent in Saudi classrooms, where it engages students in discussions. Teacher questioning tactics are essential in EFL conversations in the classroom. Research indicates that educators utilize different categories of questions, such as convergent, divergent, procedural, display, and referential questions. These categories serve various purposes, including assessing students' comprehension, capturing attention, and fostering higher-order thinking [2–4]. The time and number of questions significantly influence student involvement, with questioning tactics implemented consistently throughout the course [5]. Studies demonstrate that educators are inclined to employ a greater frequency of display questions at lower skill levels and referential questions at higher levels [6]. Moreover, the duration of wait time is essential for successful questioning [7]. While questioning tactics can improve classroom interaction and student responses [8], their effectiveness depends on instructors' comprehensive understanding of question types, forms, and functions. This knowledge enables educators to foster meaningful engagement and optimize learning outcomes [9].

1.1. Research Gap

Although many studies have investigated the function of teacher questioning in EFL classrooms [10–13], most have focused on general classroom environments in Western or global contexts. These findings emphasize the importance of referential and open-ended questions in fostering substantial interaction and extended EFL learner responses. However, little attention has been given to how these questioning methods function in teacher-centered classrooms, particularly those common in Saudi Arabia. The distinct sociocultural and pedagogical dynamics of Saudi EFL classrooms, characterized by teacher-dominated discourse, have been largely overlooked. Furthermore, existing research primarily examines the categories of questions posed by teachers (e.g., referential vs. display, open-ended vs. closed-ended) while insufficiently exploring how these questions influence the subsequent interaction turn (EFL learners' responses) within the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) framework. There is a scarcity of empirical research on how Saudi EFL teachers' questioning tactics affect the intensity and duration of learners' engagement in classroom discussions.

This study examines the questioning tactics used by Saudi EFL instructors at Yanbu Industrial College and their impact on learners' responses. Specifically, it focuses on the second turn of the IRF sequence, analyzing how particular question types either enhance or inhibit classroom engagement within the Saudi context. By doing so, it enriches the understanding of effective teaching methodologies in similar educational settings.

The novelty of this study is twofold. First, it focuses on the IRF framework in Saudi classrooms, a foreign language setting where teacher-dominated discourse prevails. This research breaks new ground by exploring how questioning strategies influence the complexity, length, and engagement of learners' responses in the second turn of the IRF sequence. Second, it introduces the Extended IRF (E-IRF) framework, which examines the relationship between question types and the length and complexity of

learners' responses. This nuanced focus provides actionable insights for improving classroom interaction in teacher-dominated settings.

1.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to analyse the questioning methods utilised by Saudi EFL instructors and their impact on student responses, emphasising the role of these strategies in shaping classroom engagement. Specifically, it examines how different types of instructor questions—referential versus display and open-ended versus closed-ended—affect the length and complexity of EFL learners' responses in Saudi classrooms. Additionally, it investigates the influence of teacher questioning tactics on the second turn (response) within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) framework in teacher-centred classrooms in Saudi Arabia. By addressing these challenges, the study aims to provide useful insights into successful questioning strategies that boost learner engagement and foster active and thoughtful participation in EFL classes. These findings are intended to facilitate the professional development of EFL teachers and enhance English language instruction in Saudi Arabia.

This study is guided by two primary research questions:

1. How do different types of teacher questions influence the length and complexity of EFL learners' responses in Saudi classrooms?
2. How do teacher questioning strategies influence EFL learners' responses within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) framework in Saudi classrooms?

By addressing these research questions, the study seeks to contribute to the development of effective teaching strategies that enhance English language learning outcomes in Saudi Arabia.

2. Literature Review

The aim of this article is to examine the types of questions asked in Saudi EFL classrooms and to assess the extent to which these questions influence the length and complexity of EFL learners' talk time during classroom conversations. Previous studies [11–15] have explored the role of questioning in classroom interactions. Notably, several of these studies categorised teacher questions into two main types: 'display questions', which require EFL learners to demonstrate existing knowledge, and 'referential questions', which prompt learners to provide unknown answers or express their opinions and attitudes [11]. Both types are significant in this study and are considered within the Saudi EFL context, where referential questions are typically dominant.

2.1. Teacher Questioning Strategies in EFL Classrooms

Recent studies on teacher questioning strategies in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia and other contexts reveal several key findings. Teachers predominantly use closed, lower-order, and display questions [4,16,17], while open-ended and higher-order questions are less frequent. Common questioning strategies include prompting, probing, and reinforcement [4]. Teachers employ convergent, divergent, and procedural questions to assess understanding, capture attention, and engage students [2]. Research has shown that questioning strategies positively impact classroom interaction and student participation [17]. However, some teachers face challenges in effective implementation, such as providing insufficient response time for complex questions [18]. Teachers' beliefs about the importance of teaching reading strategies are significantly correlated with their classroom practices [19], highlighting the need for professional development in questioning techniques.

Alghamdy [16] assesses how often Saudi EFL teachers use questioning techniques and the types of questions they ask to improve student involvement and communication in the classroom. The study found that there is a need for an increase in the use of higher-order, open-ended, and referential questions in Saudi EFL classes to encourage learners to analyse information critically and actively participate in class. It was noted that most instructors rely on lower-order, closed, and display questions. Higher cognitive-level, complex, and referential questions were found to promote greater interaction, while lower-level, simple, and display questions resulted in limited engagement.

Building on this, Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi [17] investigate the impact of teacher questioning strategies on promoting communication in language classrooms. Their

research reveals that such strategies can substantially enhance communication levels. Factors such as question complexity, cognitive level, question type, and communication patterns were found to influence the frequency of communication. Teachers' questioning strategies significantly affect classroom interaction in EFL environments, with higher-order, sophisticated, and referential questions fostering increased interaction, whereas lower-order, simplistic, and display questions limit involvement.

Similarly, Nashruddin and Ningtyas [4] examine the reasons for employing specific questioning strategies in classroom interactions, the categories of questions used, and the approaches employed by instructors. Data was gathered through interviews, observations, and recordings using a qualitative discourse analysis approach. The analysis revealed that instructors primarily employed closed and knowledge-based questions, depending on the lesson material, while synthesis and evaluation questions were less frequent. Techniques such as reinforcement, prompting, and probing at various educational stages had a positive influence on student involvement and classroom interaction.

2.2. Display Vs Referential Questions

The role of display questions and referential questions in classroom conversations has been the focus of previous research. Brock [10] found during his study, which included observations of four teachers across two treatment groups and two control groups, that when teachers ask more referential questions, they promote longer and more complex EFL learners' responses. Building on this, Nunan [12] observes that most non-communicative classroom conversations are heavily reliant on display questions. Several researchers, such as Long and Sato [2] and Morell [20], argue that referential questions are essential for creating genuine conversations, which cannot be achieved by asking display questions alone. This body of research focuses on authentic features of conversation rather than the opportunities provided to EFL learners to participate in the classroom.

Nevertheless, Van Lier [21] argues that both display and referential questions in second language discourse serve the functions of providing, controlling, and eliciting language from EFL learners, which are core aims of EFL teaching. Similarly, Koshik [14] contends that the distinction between these two types of questions is less important

in the context of classroom interaction. This aligns with research showing that the relationship between dialogic teacher talk and EFL learners' achievement is mediated by learner engagement [22], highlighting that EFL learner engagement is crucial.

2.3. Open-ended Vs Closed-ended Questions

If referential and display questions both create opportunities for EFL learners to participate in classroom conversations, which is a key aim of EFL teaching, what are the specific factors in a teacher's use of questioning that may either create or block participation? This leads us to explore which types of questions are most effective in encouraging EFL learners to engage in classroom conversations and support their learning. Previous studies show that while both referential and display questions create opportunities for EFL learners to take on more significant roles in classroom conversations, there is a notable difference between closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions invite brief responses, such as 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe', and place few demands on learners, as the answers typically require only a word or phrase. In contrast, open-ended questions invite extended responses and place greater cognitive demands on EFL learners, often requiring them to contribute several sentences and reveal their reasoning [15]. Hiebert and Wearne [23] define open-ended questions as higher-order questions and closed-ended questions as lower-order questions. Following this, Lee and Kinzie [24] describe open-ended questions as high-quality questions that stimulate the learning process, expand thinking, and significantly impact learning outcomes.

Rymes and Pash [13] argue that referential questions can often be open-ended, leading to richer classroom conversations. However, they also point out that referential questions can sometimes be closed-ended, depending on their purpose [15]. This raises the question of which type of question—open-ended or closed-ended—leads to more meaningful classroom interaction. Elstgeest [25] suggests that teachers should use questioning to encourage reasoning and active engagement. Similarly, Hiebert and Wearne [23] found that when learners are asked to explain the reasoning behind their answers or describe situations, they engage in deeper thinking, resulting in longer and more

detailed responses. Lee and Kinzie [24] further highlight that open-ended questions encourage learners to use a wider range of vocabulary and more complex sentence structures.

Another important factor is how teachers follow up on questions to encourage extended answers. For instance, Schuman and Presser [26] emphasise the value of asking 'why' questions as a follow-up to closed-ended questions, enabling learners to elaborate on their responses. Elstgeest [25] also argues that even display questions can prompt learners to speak for longer if teachers provide opportunities for explanation or reasoning. Therefore, it is clear that teachers should ask questions that promote interaction, reasoning, and extended responses, particularly in the EFL context, where the goal is to encourage learners to speak. Open-ended questions, whether display or referential, appear to be the most effective in fostering interaction and will form the focus of this article.

2.4. The Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) Framework

2.4.1. Definition and Structure of the IRF Framework

The Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) framework, developed by Sinclair and Coulthard [27], serves as a paradigm for analysing classroom interaction. It consists of three key elements: teacher initiation, student response, and teacher feedback [5,27]. Research suggests that the IRF pattern encourages learner-initiated interaction and creates opportunities for student participation [5,28]. The framework has been utilised across various language skills, including speaking, reading, listening, and writing, to examine and improve classroom discourse. Studies indicate that instructor elicitation often dominates the IRF sequence [29], highlighting the central role of the teacher in guiding classroom conversations.

While the IRF model reveals the dominance of instructors in classroom interactions [28], it also provides educators with a valuable tool for refining their teaching methods and enhancing student engagement [30]. For instance, by analysing the IRF sequence, teachers can identify moments where student responses can be expanded upon or where feedback can be adapted to encourage deeper understanding. Moreover, the framework has proven effective in fostering interaction across different language skills, helping students develop critical abilities such as constructing extended responses in speaking tasks or engaging in discussions during reading activities.

In summary, the IRF framework not only serves as a diagnostic tool for understanding classroom interaction but also plays an essential role in improving teaching practices and promoting meaningful student participation.

2.4.2. The role of teachers' questioning in the initiation phase and the response phase (second turn).

Teacher questioning is essential for initiating classroom interactions and influencing student responses. Open-ended questions and non-IRF structures promote heightened student engagement and the substantiation of ideas [31]. Teachers' questioning methods exhibit both variability and consistency during course sequences [32]. The initiating phase of questioning encompasses several techniques, including organising, pitching, and directing [33]. During the response phase, teacher feedback can take several forms, influencing student cognition and supporting the creation of new knowledge [34]. Effective questioning requires educators to be attentive to student input and adapt their approaches to facilitate dialogic discourse for learning [35].

Hwang [31] investigates the connections between student engagement, turn-taking behaviours, and teacher questioning through a conversation-analytic methodology. Examining three primary school instructors across several sessions, the study found that open-ended questions (e.g., "why," "how," "agree/disagree") and non-IRE patterns (not adhering to the initiation-response-feedback format) fostered deeper learner involvement by encouraging justification of thoughts and challenges to peers' perspectives. Conversely, closed-ended questions (e.g., "what") and conventional IRE patterns resulted in brief, singular answers. The research advocates for the use of open-ended questions and non-IRE patterns to promote active classroom conversation.

Building on this, Drageset [36] categorises learner explanations into three types: actions, reasons, and concepts. Analysing the questioning techniques of five educators, the study demonstrates a strong relationship between teacher

initiations and the type of explanations provided by learners. Three primary teacher response strategies were identified: highlighting aspects to notice, soliciting additional detail, and affirming before proceeding. The findings contribute to our understanding of how teachers can effectively initiate and respond to learner explanations to support deeper engagement.

Miao and Heining-Boynton [37] examine the integration of the Initiation/Response/Follow-Up (IRF) interaction style with the Response to Intervention (RTI) methodology in foreign language classrooms. Conducted in two immersion classrooms with two educators and 102 learners, the study analyses IRF patterns and documents the instructors' cooperative RTI processes. The results indicate that combining the IRF framework with RTI enhances instructional delivery, fosters greater learner participation, and provides a useful framework for assessing oral proficiency and creating productive speaking environments.

Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of effective questioning and response strategies in fostering meaningful classroom discourse. Studies 1 and 2 explore specific questioning techniques and their impact on learner explanations, while Study 3 examines the integration of communication models to enhance language acquisition. Together, they provide valuable insights for educators, illustrating how thoughtful questioning and feedback strategies can transform classrooms into more engaging and effective learning environments.

3. Methodology

The study discussed in this article examined the questioning strategies used by EFL teachers to explore how these strategies create opportunities for EFL learners to participate in classroom discussions. A qualitative methodology was employed through classroom observation at Yanbu Industrial College (YIC). Two EFL classes of similar length were recorded to identify the questioning strategies each teacher used to elicit responses from learners during tasks. The tasks included a dialogue activity in the first class and a reading activity in the second. Both recordings were transcribed and analysed by the researcher.

In the first class, focused on the dialogue task, the teacher recorded the session, and two recordings were selected for analysis based on the types of questions asked. In the second class, which focused on a reading task, the teacher posed questions about a technical topic on jet engines from the technical English textbook used at YIC. The analysis of these classroom interactions provided insight into how different questioning strategies influenced learner participation and engagement.

3.1. Research Design

We employed a qualitative case study method to gain deeper insights into how teachers ask questions and how this influences student interactions in the classroom. This method was chosen to examine naturally occurring conversations in Saudi EFL classes, as it enables the researcher to capture authentic dialogue and the nuances of the classroom context. By recording real classroom interactions, this approach allowed the researcher to observe not only the questioning strategies used by teachers but also the subtleties of how these strategies shape the dynamics of student engagement and communication. This method provided a rich, contextual understanding of the interplay between teacher questioning and student interaction in a naturalistic setting.

3.2. Participants

Participants in the study included two EFL teachers and forty male students from Yanbu Industrial College who were learning English. The two teachers had extensive experience in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia, with more than five years of professional experience and specialised TEFL qualifications. The students, aged 18 to 22, were classified as intermediate-level EFL learners based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The classes followed a teacher-centred teaching paradigm, a typical approach in the Saudi academic system, where the teacher leads discussions and students respond. English served as the primary language of instruction, with Arabic occasionally used to clarify points. These participant characteristics provided a relevant context for examining questioning strategies in a classroom environment where the teacher plays a central role in facilitating learning and interaction.

3.3. Data collection

The primary methods of data collection were classroom observation and audio recording. These approaches enabled a detailed analysis of teacher-student interactions, with a particular focus on the types of questions teachers asked and the responses given by students. By capturing authentic classroom conversations, these methods provided valuable insights into the dynamics of teacher questioning and its impact on student engagement and participation. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (**Appendix 1**)

3.3.1. Classroom Observations and Audio Recordings

The researcher observed two classes and recorded them to examine authentic interactions between teachers and students, with a focus on various types of teacher questions (referential vs. display, open-ended vs. closed-ended) and their influence on student participation and response styles. The observations aimed to determine how questioning strategies impacted classroom interactions and student engagement. To maintain an uninterrupted flow of activities, the researcher adopted a non-intrusive approach, allowing interactions to emerge naturally without interference.

In addition, classroom recordings were employed to ensure the conversations were accurately documented. Two sessions of equal duration were recorded. In Lesson 1 (Dialogue Task), students participated in a role-play activity resembling a radio or TV interview, designed to encourage extended verbal participation. In Lesson 2 (Reading Understanding Task), students answered questions based on a technical English passage about jet engines. The questions were specifically designed to assess students' understanding and elicit answers to both display and referential questions. These methods provided valuable insights into how different questioning techniques influence student participation and foster meaningful classroom interactions.

3.3.2. Transcription

A careful analysis of the conversations was conducted by transcribing all audio recordings verbatim. To ensure the transcriptions captured the full context of the exchanges, they incorporated teacher queries, student responses, pauses, and instances of code-switching. Including these elements provided a detailed account of the interactions, highlighting subtle nuances such as moments of hesitation and shifts between languages. This meticulous transcription process was essential for analysing how questioning strategies influenced student participation and classroom communication.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Data Analysis

Following the collection and transcription of classroom data, a methodical qualitative analysis was undertaken to explore the impact of teacher questions on student responses. The process involved coding the transcripts to categorise each type of teacher question and then analysing the corresponding student responses using the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) framework. The IRF framework was selected for its ability to highlight the dynamic interplay between teacher initiation, student replies, and teacher feedback. This approach provided valuable insights into how different questioning strategies influenced student engagement and classroom interaction.

4.1.1. Coding Question Types

The questions posed by each educator were examined and classified according to established research definitions. Questions were categorised as referential, in which the teacher seeks authentic information, or display, in which the teacher already knows the answer and evaluates student understanding. They were further classified as open-ended, encouraging elaborative responses, or closed-ended, requiring concise, factual, or simple yes or no answers.

The researcher carefully analysed the transcripts line by line, assigning codes to each question based on its context and wording. To ensure consistency, clear criteria for each category (e.g., open versus closed, referential versus display) were established prior to the analysis. Sample questions were verified against these criteria throughout the process to maintain reliability. This systematic cate-

gorisation enabled the researcher to explore patterns in teacher questioning and their impact on student responses.

4.1.2. Analysing Student Responses

Each teacher's question was analysed for the length and complexity of the accompanying student response, which represented the second turn in the IRF sequence. Responses were evaluated based on their length (e.g., single word, one sentence, or multiple sentences) and the degree of complexity or elaboration in the language used. This included recording the number of words or sentences, the presence of reasoning or explanations, and the use of more sophisticated terminology or code-switching.

For instance, an open-ended question such as "Can you describe Abha?" elicited a multi-sentence response with descriptive details (Extract 1.2, Turns 16–20), whereas a closed-ended question like "Do you like Al-Ahsa?" resulted in a brief affirmative answer (Extract 1.1, Turn 12). These examples illustrate the broader pattern: open-ended questions tended to generate lengthier and more detailed responses, while closed-ended questions typically produced shorter and more straightforward replies. This analysis highlights the significant role of question type in shaping the depth and complexity of student participation in classroom interactions.

4.1.3. Recognising Interaction Patterns

The analysis also explored extended IRF sequences beyond individual question-and-answer pairs. Specifically, the researcher examined how educators responded to student answers during the feedback move (the third turn in the IRF sequence) and whether these reactions encouraged further student engagement. For example, when a student provided a brief answer to a closed-ended question, the teacher sometimes followed up with a prompt such as "Why?" or "How?" These follow-ups were analysed to determine how they transformed completed exchanges into open-ended dialogues, prompting students to elaborate on their responses. In one instance (Extract 2, Turns 7–10), a teacher's "Why?" inquiry prompted a detailed response from the student, demonstrating the potential of feedback moves to foster deeper engagement. This approach highlighted the pivotal role of feedback in extending classroom

interactions and encouraging more meaningful student participation.

4.1.4. Iterative and Comprehensive Analysis

The analytical procedure was both iterative and inductive, as the researcher repeatedly examined the transcripts to refine the coding process and identify nuances in the interactions. Preliminary coding outcomes were reviewed to ensure the accurate categorisation of each question, with uncertainties resolved by analysing contextual indicators, such as the educator's tone or intent. This approach enabled the researcher to identify distinct themes regarding the influence of various questioning strategies on student engagement.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, basic quantitative metrics—such as the frequency of question types and the average response length—were employed to identify trends, including the prevalence of specific question types and their associated response patterns. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how questioning tactics shaped classroom interactions and student participation.

4.1.5. Clarity and Trustworthiness

The study ensures transparency in deriving findings from raw data by clearly outlining the data analysis procedures, including the coding framework, evaluation of student answers, and analysis of IRF patterns. This meticulous methodology enhances the reliability of the findings and adheres to established standards in qualitative classroom research, where a clear explanation of the analytical process is crucial for validating inferences. By maintaining transparency, the study substantiates the relationship between teacher questioning strategies and student participation, strengthening the credibility of its conclusions and allowing for replication in future research.

4.2. Discussion

This section describes the study's outcomes and examines their implications within the context of previous research on teacher questioning strategies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The study focuses on

the questioning techniques used by two EFL instructors at Yanbu Industrial College (YIC) and their impact on student responses within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model. The analysis aimed to identify patterns in questioning tactics and their effects on the length, complexity, and engagement of student responses.

The research is based on two classroom transcripts obtained from observations and audio recordings. Each lesson featured a distinct activity: Lesson 1 involved a Dialogue Activity (**Appendix 2**), while Lesson 2 included a Reading Comprehension Activity (**Appendix 3**). The results are presented according to the types of questions employed by the educators—open-ended versus closed-ended and referential versus display—and their impact on student responses. These findings shed light on how different questioning strategies influence the dynamics of student participation and engagement in EFL classrooms.

4.2.1. Lesson 1: Dialogue Activity

Students engaged in a role-play that simulated a television or radio interview. The instructor assumed the role of the interviewer and posed questions to elicit responses from the students.

Key Observations:

Closed-Ended Referential Questions:

In *Extract 1.1*, the teacher predominantly used closed-ended referential questions, such as "What is your hometown?" and "Do you like Al-Ahsa?" These questions elicited brief, one-word or phrase-based responses, as observed in Turns 4, 6, and 12. For example, a student responded, *"Yeah, sure. I'm very happy"* (Turn 12). Although referential questions are generally intended to encourage more detailed answers, their closed-ended structure in this instance limited student interaction and reduced opportunities for extended engagement.

Open-Ended Referential Questions:

In *Extract 1.2*, the teacher used open-ended referential questions, such as "Can you describe Abha?" and "How do you enjoy your time in Abha?" These questions prompted lengthier and more detailed responses from students (e.g., Turns 16, 18, and 20). Students utilised extended phrases, richer vocabulary, and code-switching (e.g., *"Aqarib,"* meaning family) to convey their ideas. For instance, one student described their hometown by stating: *"It*

is high, I mean it is over mountains... there is fruit special in Abha, you cannot see it in another city" (Turn 18).

The findings align with prior studies which demonstrate that open-ended referential questions encourage longer and more complex responses by allowing students to articulate their thoughts freely [38,39]. Conversely, closed-ended referential questions restrict engagement by reducing cognitive demand. This supports Schuman and Presser's [26] assertion that "why" and "how" questions are crucial for fostering deeper participation.

4.2.2. Lesson 2: Reading Comprehension Activity

Students responded to questions derived from a technical English text concerning jet engines. The instructor employed a combination of display and referential questions to evaluate understanding and promote discussion.

Transcript 1 (Appendix 2):

The task recorded by this transcript shows a dialogue between the teacher and EFL learners in the classroom. The pedagogical goal was to create a situation where learners could engage in extended classroom conversations. The task, taken from the classroom textbook, required students to role-play a radio or TV interview. To carry this out, the teacher played the role of the interviewer, while the learners acted as the interviewees, facilitating meaningful exchanges.

During these tasks, the teacher began by asking students to provide information that he did not already know. This approach aimed to encourage participation in oral interactions. According to Brock [10], when second language instructors pose referential questions (i.e., questions requesting unknown information), learners tend to produce longer and more complex responses. However, in this task, most of the referential questions were closed-ended, requiring yes/no answers.

In *Extract 1.1*, the second phase of the IRF sequence (learner responses) was clearly influenced by the closed-ended nature of the teacher's questions. Despite attempts by students to extend their turns (e.g., Turns 4 and 6), they repeated themselves due to the restrictive nature of the questions.

Although studies such as Brock [10] suggest that referential questions elicit longer and more complex respons-

es than display questions, *Extract 1.1* demonstrates that closed-ended referential questions constrained learner participation. The teacher's use of such questions obstructed rather than supported extended responses from students.

Extract 1.1

1. **T:** Okay so let's start now our task uh for today Um the first task we'll do is I'll ask all of you some questions, just consider it as dialogue and try to answer the questions I'll give you. First of all, let's start with Saud, uh what is your hometown?
2. **S1**: Country?
3. **T:** What is your home country so, or where did you come from?
4. **S1**: I'm from in Hofuf, Alahsa city. In Hofuf=.
5. **T:** =Aha.
6. **S1**: Hofuf (2), um I'm from.
7. **T**: So, you are from Al-Ahsa?
8. **S1**: Yeah.
9. **T**: And uh do you like the weather in Al-Ahsa? Is it hot? Is it cold? (2)
10. **S1**: Oh, uh very, very hot and uh the.
11. **T**: Yeah. So, do you enjoy living in Al-Ahsa? Do you like Al-Ahsa? (2)
12. **S1**: Yeah, sure. I'm very happy.

Extract 1.2 is dissimilar to Extract 1.1. It is evident that when the teacher asked more open-ended referential questions, the EFL learners in this extract had more opportunities to participate in the dialogue. In the second turn of the IRF sequence, the learners gave more extended answers (Turns 16, 18, and 20). Even though they struggled to complete their turns, they used code-switching (e.g., *Aqarib*, meaning "family") to continue speaking.

The use of questions such as "Can you describe?" (Turn 15), "Can you tell us what is your hometown famous for?" (Turn 17), and "How do you spend your time in Abha?" (Turn 19) significantly affected the length of the learners' responses in the second phase of the IRF system. By allowing students to elaborate, these open-ended questions encouraged greater participation and more detailed answers.

Extract 1.2

13. **T:** Okay! Let's now move to you Abdullah, uh what is your hometown?
14. **S2:** I from Abha=

15. **T:** = Aha. Can you describe Abha? (2)
16. **S2**: Oh, uh this city, can you, old city, older and a small city, and uh from a very, very few people, the live in here city and uh, uh very nice tonight uh another uh nice air. a nice and uh beautiful.
17. **T:** Good, good and can you tell us what is your hometown famous for?
18. **S2**: Yes! It is high I mean it over mountains— there is fruit is special in Abha, you cannot see it in another city. For example, Grape and others.
19. **T:** Well1! How do you enjoy your time in Abha? Uh how do you spend your free time there?
20. **S2**: I like to go with friends to farms and set there uh (2) drink tea and coffee. Also, we visit family and (3) AQARIB relatives
21. **T:** Relatives
22. **S2:** relatives for example uncles, cousins.

Transcript 2 (Appendix 3):

In the extract below (2), the teacher explained that the pedagogical goal of the task was to measure his EFL learners' comprehension of a passage they read in class. Taking Walsh's [40] findings into account, teachers use appropriate language when they are aware of their pedagogical goals. In this task, the teacher stated that he asked display questions to test the learners' understanding.

After the learners finished reading the passage, the teacher asked two closed-ended display questions in Turns 1 and 3, which elicited short answers (e.g., one word in Turn 2 and two words in Turn 4). However, in Turn 5, the teacher asked a more open-ended question ("Can you explain?"), giving the learner (S3) an opportunity to provide a longer response in Turn 6. This opportunity challenges the claim of Rymes and Pash [13] that referential questions are the only way to foster richer conversations.

In Turn 7, the teacher reverted to a closed-ended question, which resulted in a short response from the learner (S4) in Turn 8. To encourage elaboration, the teacher followed up with a "Why?" question in Turn 9. This strategy succeeded, as the learner (S4) found it an appropriate opportunity to give an extended answer in Turn 10. The teacher's approach reinforces the findings of some previous studies [23,25,26], demonstrating the importance of follow-up questions in promoting deeper learner engagement.

Extract 2.

1. **T**: Now uh after we finish reading the passage let's (2) now answer the following questions from the passage. Ali! How many types of engine does the passage speak about? (1)
2. **S1**: yes, three=
3. **T**: =three aha. (2) Now Tariq! What do the pictures uh at the top of page number uh number 23 try to explain? You think? (2)
4. **S2**: uh I think uh the engine work
5. **T:** Ok! Yes, how does the engine work? (2) Now your turn Yousef. Can you explain briefly how does jet engine works uh work?
6. **S3**: OK! Uh (1) the engine suck air then uh compressor pressing uh air. Then uh (2) air then mixed with fuel. Then uh (3) the mix mix goes out through the nozzle, at the back of the engine.
7. **T**: that is fantastic. You! Is jet engine important (2)
8. **S4**: important! yes is very uh very important
9. **T**: why?
10. **S4:** for many reasons for example the jet engine produces the power for plain to move fast and uh and (1) they uh help people to travel far over the oceans uh and to far away countries such as USA and Canada uh and (mm) many places may be was difficult to go them.
11. **T**: well done everybody now let's move to the next exercise.

In conclusion, the two classroom transcripts demonstrate that the type of questioning strategy used—whether open-ended or closed-ended—significantly impacts EFL learner participation in classroom conversations. When the teacher employs open-ended questions, learners are given greater opportunities to contribute, which substantially increases their chances to practise English and engage in extended discussions. Conversely, the use of closed-ended questions limits learners' opportunities for meaningful participation and restricts the depth of classroom interactions. Notably, when the teacher uses the open-ended question "Why?", it helps to address the limitations caused by a preceding closed-ended question, providing the learner with an opportunity to elaborate further and extend their turn.

4.2.3. Types of Questions

EFL learners' responses were positively influenced by open-ended and referential questions, resulting in longer engagement and more extensive language use (**Table 1**). Although display and closed-ended questions are effective for assessing comprehension, they offer limited opportunities for in-depth discussion. The findings of this study emphasise the importance of employing open-ended questioning strategies to enhance EFL learners' participation and engagement in English as a foreign language classrooms.

Table 1. Summary Table Comparing the Types of Questions.

Type of Question	Definition	Examples from study	Observed Effects on EFL learners Responses
Referential Questions	Questions requiring information unknown to the teacher, encouraging personal input or opinions	Can you describe Abha?	Encouraged more genuine and extended responses, allowing EFL learners to express their ideas and use a wider range of vocabulary
Display Questions	Questions to which the teacher already knows the answer, often used to assess comprehension.	How many types of engines does the passage mention?	Typically elicited short and factual responses. However, when combined with follow-up prompts (e.g., "Why?"), richer responses were observed.
Open-Ended Questions	|Questions inviting detailed, elaborative responses, often requiring reasoning or explanation.	How do you enjoy your time in Abha?	| Led to longer, more complex sentences, fostering EFL learner's engagement and encouraging deeper cognitive processing
Closed-Ended Questions	Questions requiring brief, often one-word or phrase answers (e.g., yes/no).	Do you like Al-Ahsa?	Limited EFL learners' responses to short, simple answers, restricting opportunities for extended interaction and language use.

Genuine or Long Turn

An analysis of the two extracts reveals a noteworthy difference between referential and display questions: the genuine nature of the talk they generate. Both types of questions are used to elicit responses from EFL learners; however, as Van Lier [21] notes, they have differing impacts on the authenticity of classroom conversations. For example, in extracts 1.1 and 1.2, where the teacher employs referential questions, learners produce more genuine contributions compared to the responses seen in extract 2, where display questions are used. This finding aligns with Long and Sato [11], who argue that referential questions are more effective in prompting authentic conversations than display questions. However, it is important to note that referential questions do not necessarily result in extended talking time, as demonstrated in extract 1.1.

Table 2 demonstrates that open-ended questions, both referential and display, significantly enhance student engagement by eliciting lengthy and intricate responses (e.g., exceeding 20 words per turn, as shown in **Table 2**). These types of questions not only foster greater participation but also encourage deeper cognitive processing. In contrast, closed-ended referential and display questions often limit student involvement, resulting in brief responses (e.g., 3–5 words per turn). However, effective follow-up prompts, such as "why" or "how," can transform closed-ended questions into opportunities for more meaningful and extended interaction.

Table 2. A summary comparing question types and their effects on student responses.

Question Type	Average Response Length	Complexity Level	Engagement Level
Open-Ended + Referential	20+ words	High	High
Closed-Ended + Referential	3–5 words	Low	Limited
Open-Ended + Display	20+ words	High	High
Closed-Ended + Display	2–4 words	Low	Limited

4.3. Evolving Questioning Practices in Saudi EFL Classrooms: Cultural, Pedagogical, and Policy Perspectives

This research examines how social conventions, educator ideologies, and educational regulations shape classroom structures, questioning practices, and the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Saudi Arabia. Historically, Saudi EFL classrooms have been hierarchical and teacher-centred, with teachers regarded as the primary authority and students expected to show significant deference. Cultural norms discourage spontaneous participation, favouring closed-ended display questions that allow instructors to maintain control over classroom interactions.

As English is seldom spoken outside the classroom in Saudi Arabia, these environments often serve as students' sole opportunity to develop their language skills. An educational history focused on right answers and memorisation has shaped the beliefs of many Saudi EFL instructors, who often view their role as imparting knowledge rather than fostering dialogue. Open-ended questions, as a result, are perceived as disruptive to classroom order, leading to the widespread use of closed, low-cognitive questions.

However, our findings challenge these assumptions. They demonstrate that deliberate use of open-ended questions can enhance student engagement without undermining classroom control, even in traditionally hierarchical settings. Institutional dynamics and policies also play a role. Saudi Arabia's emphasis on high-stakes testing and memorisation has reinforced teacher-centred practices while discouraging critical thinking and inquiry. Although reforms, such as Saudi Vision 2030, aim to promote com-

municative and student-centred approaches, many classrooms remain in transition. Consistent with Alghamdy [16], this creates an environment where display questions dominate, while open-ended questions are still seldom used.

By situating this research within the shifting educational context of Saudi Arabia, we highlight how promoting open and referential questioning aligns with emerging goals for student-centred instruction. This underscores the need for instructional transformation to foster greater language development and meaningful learner engagement.

4.4. Theoretical Framework

Despite comprehensive research on teacher questioning and the IRF sequence, no theoretical model currently exists to unify question type and student participation within teacher-centred EFL contexts. Conventional discourse models, such as the IRF, delineate interaction patterns; however, they fail to account for how the type of teacher initiation (question type) can significantly influence student responses and participation. This paper empirically addresses this gap and introduces a conceptual framework to enhance the understanding and prediction of these processes.

Extended IRF Model

Building on our results and expanding on Sinclair and Coulthard's [27] classic IRF model, this research introduces an **Extended IRF Framework** that incorporates question type as a key component influencing the IRF sequence. The Extended IRF Framework is based on the following components:

- **Initiation (I) Sequence:**
  The initiation sequence is defined by a two-dimensional typology of questions:
  (a) **Cognitive Openness**, which distinguishes between open-ended and closed-ended questions, and
  (b) **Knowledge Source**, which contrasts referential and display questions.
  These dimensions shape the nature and depth of student involvement.

- **Response (R) Sequence:**
  The student's response is examined in relation to these question types. For instance, open-ended initiations (whether referential or display) are expected to

elicit more detailed answers compared to closed-ended initiations, which typically result in shorter responses. Whether the question seeks new information (referential) or existing knowledge (display) further moderates the effect of open-endedness on the length and complexity of the learner's response.

- **Feedback (F) Stage:**
  This stage is redefined to include **adaptive follow-ups**, particularly after closed-ended questions. By asking students to elaborate or provide additional information, teachers can transform the conversation flow and foster greater participation. These follow-ups create a continuous cycle of engagement rather than a fixed three-part exchange, allowing teachers to loop back from Feedback (F) to a new Initiation (I'). This highlights the dynamic and non-linear nature of classroom interaction.

The Extended IRF Framework addresses gaps in conventional IRF analysis by integrating question typology with discourse structure. Unlike other models that adopt a generalised approach to teacher initiation (e.g., yes/no display versus open referential), this framework emphasises the specific effects of question types on the IRF flow. Moving beyond Western, student-centred paradigms, the model provides a nuanced understanding of teacher-centred EFL environments. By demonstrating how teacher-guided interactions can encourage dialogic involvement, the framework highlights the importance of **strategic inquiry**. It offers practical applications for teacher education and research, guiding educators towards using open-ended questions and follow-up prompts to elicit more detailed and meaningful student responses.

5. Limitation

This study utilised a small, context-specific sample, limiting the generalisability of its findings. Observations were restricted to two EFL instructors and forty male students at a single Saudi university (YIC), based on data from only two classes. Trends such as open-ended questions eliciting longer replies should be interpreted cautiously, as results may vary in settings with different populations, proficiency levels, or topics. Additionally, participants' awareness of being observed may have influ-

enced their behaviour, impacting interaction patterns (observer's paradox). These factors suggest the need for careful consideration when applying the findings to other EFL teaching contexts.

The study's analytical scope and proposed Extended IRF framework also present limitations. While focusing on immediate outcomes, such as the length and complexity of student responses, the study did not evaluate long-term learning gains. The Extended IRF framework, based on limited data, requires further testing in diverse contexts to ensure broader applicability. Additionally, the qualitative analysis, conducted by a single researcher, introduces potential subjectivity. Future research with larger, more diverse samples, including female learners and mixed-methods approaches, would help validate these findings and ensure their relevance across varied EFL teaching environments.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of open-ended and referential questions in enhancing classroom interaction and increasing engagement among EFL learners in Saudi EFL courses. Unlike closed-ended questions, which limit learner responses, open-ended questions promote meaningful discussions, fostering greater participation and extended dialogue. The findings highlight the necessity of teacher training programmes that prioritise effective questioning strategies, particularly in teacher-centred classrooms such as those in Saudi Arabia. By understanding the distinction between open-ended and closed-ended questions, educators can create a more engaging learning environment, enabling second-language learners to participate actively and improve their linguistic abilities.

Referential questions are vital for cultivating authentic conversations, while display questions can also encourage dialogue when framed in an open-ended format. However, referential questions are more likely to elicit genuine and spontaneous exchanges, thereby providing learners with a richer environment for language development. Although this study focuses on educators at YIC, its recommendations are broadly applicable to Saudi EFL classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to diversify their

questioning strategies and assess the effectiveness of different approaches in enhancing student engagement during classroom interactions.

The paper recommends that future research extend these findings to other EFL contexts and explore innovative questioning techniques, particularly in digital and hybrid learning settings. Such research could deepen the understanding of how to optimise teacher-learner interactions and support improved language acquisition. Ultimately, this study emphasises the transformative potential of well-designed questioning strategies in empowering EFL learners and fostering dynamic, communicative classrooms.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the academic and research oversight committee of the English Language Department, Royal Commission Education Division, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (IRB/25/070 in 17 July 2025).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (**Appendix 3**)

Data Availability Statement

The data can be accessed by contacting the author mousa@rcjy.edu.sa

the success of this study. I am also sincerely grateful to the students, whose active participation, insights, and collaboration played a vital role in enriching the findings of this research. This work would not have been possible without the inspiring academic environment and the unwavering support provided by the Yanbu English Language Depart-ment. Thank you all for your contributions and encouragement.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

APPENDIX 1

Informed Consent Letter

Dear Participant Name,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Musa Alghamdi, and I am conducting a research study at Yanbu English Language and Prep. Year Institution (Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia). The purpose of this study is to examine EFL teachers' questioning strategies and their impact on student engagement in the classroom.

Your participation will involve:
• Allowing classroom observations and audio recordings during lessons
• Having your responses analysed for research purposes
• No identifying information will be included in any reports or publications
Please note:
• Your participation is entirely voluntary
• You can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty
• All information will be kept strictly confidential and used only for research purposes
• There are no anticipated risks, and your participation will contribute to improving EFL teaching and learning

If you agree to participate, please reply to this email indicating your consent. For example, you may write: "I have read the information above and agree to participate in the research study."

If you have any questions or need further information, please feel free to contact me at mousa@rcjy.edu.sa.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Best regards,
Musa Alghamdi

Yanbu English Language and Prep. Year Institution
mousa@rcjy.edu.sa

APPENDIX 2

1. T: Okay so let's start now our task uh for today Um the first task we'll do is I'll ask all of you some questions, just consider it as dialogue and try to answer the questions I'll give you. First of all let's start with Mohammad, uh what is your hometown?

2. S1: Country?

3. T: What is your home country so, or where did you come from?

4. S1: I'm from in Hofuf, Alahsa city. In Hofuf=.

5. T: =Aha.

6.   S1: Hofuf (2), um I'm from.

7.   T: So you are from Al-Ahsa?

8.   S1: Yeah.

9.   T: And uh do you like the weather in Al-Ahsa? Is it hot? Is it cold? (2)

10.   S1: Oh uh very, very hot and uh the.

11.   T: Yeah. So do you enjoy living in Al-Ahsa? Do you like Al-Ahsa?(2)

12.   S1: Yeah, sure. I'm very happy.

13.   T: Okay! Let's now move to you Abdullah, uh what is your hometown?

14.   S2: I from Abha=

15.   T: = Aha. Can you describe Abha?(2)

16.   S2: Oh uh this city, can you, old city, older and a small city, and uh from a very, very few people, the live in here city and uh, uh very nice tonight uh another uh nice air.. nice and uh beautiful.

17.   T: Good, good and can you tell us what is your hometown famous for?

18.   S2: Yes! It is high I mean it over mountains—there is fruit is special in Abha, you cannot see it in another city. For example Grape and others.

19.   T: Well1! How do you enjoy your time in Abha? Uh how do you spend your free time there?

20.   S2: I like to go with friends to farms and set there uh (2) drink tea and coffee. Also we visit family and (3) AQARIB ()

21.   T: Relatives

22.   S2: relatives for example uncles, cousins.

APPENDIX 3

1.   T: Ok! Everybody, uh now you have five minutes uh to read this passage.

2.   T: Now uh after we finish reading the passage let's (2) now answer the following questions from the passage. Ali! How many types of engine does the passage speak about? (1)

3.   S1: yes, three=

4.   T: =three aha. (2) Now Tariq! What do the pictures uh at the top of page number uh number 23 try to explain? You think? (2)

5.   S2: uh I think uh the engine work

6.   T: Ok! Yes how does the engine work? (2) Now your turn Yousef. Can you explain briefly how does jet engine works uh work?

7.   S3: OK! Uh (1) the engine suck air then uh compressor pressing uh air. Then uh (2) air then mixed with fuel. Then uh (3) the mix mix goes out through the nozzle, at the back of the engine.

8.   T: that is fantastic. You! Is jet engine important (2)

9.   S4: important! yes is very uh very important

10.   T: why?

11.   S4: for many reasons for example the jet engine produce the power for plain to move fast and uh and (1) they uh help people to travel far over the oceans uh and to far away countries such as USA and Canada uh and (mm) many places may be was difficult to go them.

12.   T: well done everybody now let's move to the next exercise

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