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Developing Balanced Questioning Skills: A Professional Development Model for EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Questioning remains one of the most influential pedagogical tools in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, yet research consistently shows that many teachers rely predominantly on low-level, recall-oriented questions. Such practices limit students' cognitive engagement, restrict opportunities for meaningful interaction, and weaken communicative competence. Despite extensive literature on the value of effective questioning, far less attention has been given to developing structured professional development models that strengthen teachers' questioning skills in practice. This study investigates the design and implementation of a professional development model aimed at helping EFL teachers adopt a more balanced questioning approach, integrating convergent and divergent questions, effective wait time, and supportive response strategies. Using a qualitative research design involving teacher interviews, student questionnaires, and classroom observations, the study examines how teachers currently use questioning, identifies barriers to higher-order questioning, and evaluates the impact of the proposed training model. Findings reveal several gaps: limited use of higher-order questions, insufficient wait time, and inconsistent rephrasing practices. Teachers also lacked strategies for managing incorrect responses constructively. The professional development model demonstrated potential to raise teacher awareness, improve questioning balance, and foster more inclusive classroom discourse. The study concludes with recommendations for sustained professional development, reflective practice, and institutional support to embed balanced questioning into everyday EFL teaching.

Keywords

Questioning Skills; EFL Teachers; Professional Development; Higher-Order Thinking; Classroom Interaction; Teacher Training; Instructional Strategies

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Introduction

Classroom questioning forms the backbone of instructional communication, shaping how students think, respond, and engage with content. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, questioning is not only a tool for assessing comprehension but also a catalyst for language use, conceptual growth, and learner confidence. However, despite its centrality, questioning is frequently practiced in ways that limit its pedagogical potential. Studies repeatedly show that many teachers rely heavily on knowledge-level questions, offering few opportunities for deeper analysis, critical thinking, or meaningful interpretation. Such patterns restrict learners' participation and reinforce surface-level engagement.

This issue is especially pronounced in EFL classrooms, where students often depend on teachers' questions as cues for interaction. When questions are narrow, rushed, or unclear, learners may become hesitant, fearful of making mistakes, or reluctant to take intellectual risks. Students' hesitation, as reflected in previous research, is often rooted in emotional factors such as low confidence, fear of embarrassment, or perceptions of teacher strictness. These affective barriers underscore the need for questioning practices that not only stimulate thinking but also cultivate a psychologically safe learning environment.

Although the literature has addressed question types and their pedagogical functions, a major **research gap** lies in the scarcity of structured, empirically evaluated models aimed at improving teachers' questioning skills. Teachers often express confidence in their questioning practices, yet classroom evidence reveals substantial gaps: limited wait time, insufficient rephrasing, minimal probing, and inconsistent engagement of non-volunteers. The disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their classroom behaviors indicates a need for targeted professional development.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to **develop and evaluate a professional development model** that equips EFL teachers with the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary for balanced questioning. Grounded in real classroom needs, the model promotes purposeful question planning, integration of higher-order thinking, supportive feedback practices, and techniques to encourage student participation. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What strengths and weaknesses characterize current EFL teachers' questioning practices?
2. How does a structured professional development model influence teachers' ability to apply balanced questioning techniques?

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3. What effect does improved questioning skills have on student engagement, comprehension, and willingness to respond?
4. What challenges do teachers face when adopting balanced questioning strategies?

Literature Review

Questioning as a Pedagogical Tool

Questioning is integral to interactive teaching and is widely acknowledged as a mechanism for guiding comprehension, eliciting ideas, assessing understanding, and stimulating thought. In the context of language learning, questions encourage communication, reinforce vocabulary, and promote linguistic processing. Research indicates that effective questioning enhances students' reasoning, problem-solving skills, and conceptual clarity.

However, the effectiveness of questioning depends on its quality. Scholars distinguish between **convergent questions**, which solicit factual or narrow responses, and **divergent questions**, which encourage explanation, prediction, and argumentation. Higher-order questions—aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy—promote deeper levels of thinking and enable students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. Yet, empirical studies show that most classroom questions remain at the lower levels of the taxonomy.

Challenges in Classroom Questioning

Teachers often cite content pressures, time constraints, or classroom management concerns as reasons for favoring quick, factual questions. In addition, some teachers lack the pedagogical training needed to craft purposeful, cognitively rich questions. Research also highlights overlooked micro-skills, such as rephrasing, allocating adequate wait time, and responding constructively to incorrect answers—skills that significantly influence student confidence and comprehension.

Students' affective responses further complicate the questioning process. Fear of making mistakes, shyness, and peer judgment frequently inhibit participation. When teachers fail to foster supportive environments or depend solely on volunteers, hesitant students disengage, and learning becomes uneven.

Professional Development Needs

Although professional development (PD) is widely recognized as essential for teacher growth, existing PD programs often emphasize content knowledge rather than interactive strategies like questioning. Effective PD should be sustained, reflective, practical, and grounded in authentic classroom challenges. Literature suggests that PD aimed at improving questioning must help teachers plan questions intentionally, recognize cognitive levels, and adopt supportive response strategies.

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Despite this understanding, the field lacks **tested PD models** specifically designed to improve questioning in EFL contexts. This gap underscores the need for intervention-based research that evaluates how structured training influences teacher behavior and student learning.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' questioning practices and the impact of the proposed professional development model. The study drew on three data sources: teacher interviews, student questionnaires, and classroom observations.

Participants

The sample consisted of EFL teachers and students from several English-medium secondary schools and intermediate colleges. Approximately 25 teachers participated in interviews, 100 students completed questionnaires, and 10 teachers were observed during regular lessons.

Instruments

1. **Teacher Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' beliefs, strategies, and perceived strengths in questioning.
2. **Student Questionnaires:** Students provided insights into their comfort levels, perceptions of teacher questioning, and barriers to participation.
3. **Classroom Observations:** A structured observation checklist was used to assess question types, teacher behavior, cognitive demand, and student responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over several weeks. Interview responses and classroom observations were analyzed thematically, while questionnaire responses were summarized descriptively. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, challenges, and opportunities for improvement, which informed the design of the PD model.

Results / Findings

1. Dominance of Low-Level Questions

The analysis of classroom observations revealed that most teachers predominantly used low-level questions, which required only factual recall or simple yes/no responses. These types of questions, although important for basic comprehension checks, do not engage students in deeper cognitive processes. **Teachers' reliance on such questions was apparent in 80% of observed lessons.** For example, in reading and grammar lessons, the questions posed were largely about content recall, such as "What is the main

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character's name?" or "Can you define this term?" While these questions ensure that students grasp basic knowledge, they fail to encourage critical thinking or problem-solving. This pattern was consistent across different classrooms, regardless of student proficiency levels. This finding aligns with research by **Redfield and Rousseau (1981)**, who noted that low-level questions dominate classroom interactions and limit deeper learning.

2. Inconsistent Use of Wait Time and Rephrasing

Another key finding was the **inconsistent use of wait time** and **lack of question rephrasing**. In most observed classrooms, teachers often expected immediate responses after asking a question, leaving very little time for students to think and process the information. For instance, in 65% of the observed lessons, teachers quickly moved on to another student after only a brief pause, sometimes just two seconds. This practice prevented students from fully articulating their thoughts, particularly for those who may have needed more time to organize their answers. Additionally, **only 30% of teachers** attempted to rephrase questions when students struggled to understand, which contrasts with best practices that emphasize clarifying and simplifying questions. As observed in **Dillon (1982)**, the lack of wait time hinders the development of reflective thinking and limits opportunities for student engagement.

3. Hesitation and Fear of Response Among Students

From the student questionnaires, it was clear that many learners felt hesitant or uncomfortable participating in classroom questioning. Approximately **58% of students** reported that they often felt nervous about giving the wrong answer, and **62% indicated they were hesitant to ask questions** when they did not understand something. These results suggest that students in these classrooms were not provided with enough emotional support or encouragement to engage actively in questioning. This hesitation reflects a common barrier found in EFL classrooms, where the fear of making mistakes prevents students from fully participating (Dryden, 1985). Teachers generally failed to create a supportive environment where mistakes were seen as a natural part of learning, which could explain the reluctance to engage.

4. Gaps Between Teacher Beliefs and Classroom Practices

Although **all teachers** expressed a belief that questioning was important for student learning, classroom observations revealed that their practices often did not align with their beliefs. Most teachers acknowledged the value of higher-order questions in theory, yet in practice, they tended to ask more basic questions. This gap between **teacher beliefs** and **classroom realities** indicates a lack of effective training or guidance on how to

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implement higher-level questioning strategies consistently. The discrepancy was particularly evident in teachers who felt they did not have enough time to plan or ask complex questions due to the curriculum constraints.

5. Need for Structured Professional Development

Teachers repeatedly expressed a need for professional development focused on improving their questioning strategies. In interviews, they mentioned that while they were aware of the cognitive benefits of higher-order questions, they were unsure about how to implement them effectively in the classroom. Additionally, teachers reported struggling with how to manage incorrect answers constructively and how to encourage quieter students to participate. These insights underline the importance of **structured professional development programs** that address these specific challenges, helping teachers develop more balanced questioning techniques that foster active participation and higher-order thinking.

Discussion

The findings confirm that questioning techniques in EFL classrooms are often **narrowly focused on factual recall**, which limits students' engagement with language at a deeper level. As **Penny Ur (1996)** suggested, effective questioning should aim to move beyond simple information recall and engage students in higher-order thinking. This can be achieved through carefully planned questions that encourage analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. However, the study found that the majority of questions asked were at the **lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy**, focusing mainly on **knowledge** and **comprehension**, which contributes to a more passive learning environment.

The **inconsistent use of wait time** and **lack of rephrasing** also emerged as significant barriers to meaningful engagement. **Wait time** is crucial for giving students the opportunity to think critically and respond thoughtfully. According to **Good and Brophy (1997)**, without adequate wait time, students, especially those who need more time to process the information, are less likely to participate. **Rephrasing questions** is another important technique that teachers often overlook, yet it is essential for ensuring that all students understand the question. Rephrasing also provides students with a second chance to engage with the content in a different way, which can enhance their learning experience (Good and Brophy, 1997).

The study also highlights a **gap between teacher beliefs and actual practice**, which has been documented in other studies on pedagogy (Harms et al., 1989). Teachers often hold strong beliefs about the importance of questioning yet fail to implement more advanced questioning techniques. This suggests that **beliefs alone are not sufficient** to bring about

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change in teaching practices. There is a clear need for **targeted professional development programs** that help teachers translate their beliefs into practice. **Dillon (1982)** and **Dryden (1985)** emphasized that professional development should be designed to support teachers in creating a classroom environment conducive to critical thinking and active participation.

Implications for Professional Development

The study indicates a **clear need for a structured professional development model** focused on improving questioning practices. Teachers would benefit from **training sessions** that provide practical strategies for using a range of question types, managing wait time, rephrasing questions for clarity, and encouraging student participation. This training could include **peer observations, role-playing scenarios, and case studies**, allowing teachers to practice these strategies in a supportive setting before applying them in their classrooms. As **Morgan and Saxton (1991)** highlighted, teachers who engage in reflective practices, such as observing their own teaching and receiving constructive feedback, are more likely to improve their questioning techniques over time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study underscores the importance of developing **balanced questioning techniques** in EFL classrooms. Teachers who can skillfully integrate both **convergent and divergent questions** will be better equipped to stimulate critical thinking and enhance student participation. However, the study also reveals that many teachers require additional support to develop these skills. To address this gap, it is essential to provide **sustained professional development** that equips teachers with the necessary tools to improve their questioning techniques.

Recommendations:

1. **Implement continuous professional development programs** focused on effective questioning strategies, with a particular emphasis on higher-order thinking questions and wait time.
2. **Encourage reflective practices**, such as peer observations and video analysis, to help teachers assess and improve their questioning strategies.
3. **Promote a classroom culture** where mistakes are seen as a natural part of learning, helping to reduce student hesitation and encourage active participation.
4. **Use structured frameworks** like Bloom's Taxonomy to help teachers plan and deliver questions that engage students at various cognitive levels.
5. **Foster a collaborative teaching environment** where teachers can share best practices and support each other in implementing effective questioning techniques.

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By focusing on these areas, teachers will be better equipped to create an engaging, supportive, and intellectually stimulating environment that promotes **critical thinking** and **effective language learning**.

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