

## Impact and Functions of Questioning in English Classes

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### Abstract

This study offers valuable insights into how English teachers in Nepali secondary schools are utilizing questioning techniques in the classroom, highlighting both the strengths and challenges of current practices. Adopting a qualitative research design for the study, eight secondary-level English teachers from four community schools in the Rupandehi district were selected as informants. The data were elicited through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. First, classroom observation of eight teachers was carried out. Then, they were interviewed, and the data were processed. It was found that the teachers employed a range of questioning types, including higher-order, lower-order, and follow-up questions. These varied approaches aimed to foster interactive classroom environments and enhance students' communicative abilities. Critical thinking and brainstorming questions were also used, suggesting an effort to develop students' analytical skills. Most students responded positively to being questioned, indicating a preference for interactive engagement. However, a minority of students expressed fear of making mistakes, which could hinder their participation. Some teachers occasionally used an inappropriate tone, such as shouting or displaying anger, leading to irrelevant or unsuitable questions. This approach negatively impacted student motivation and participation. The findings highlight the importance of using a variety of questioning techniques to promote critical thinking and communication skills. Teachers should be mindful of their tone and approach when asking questions to avoid creating a fearful or uncomfortable classroom environment. There is a need for ongoing professional development to help teachers refine their questioning strategies, ensuring they are effectively fostering student engagement and critical thinking. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how questioning practices can be optimized in English language teaching to improve student learning outcomes in Nepali classrooms.

**Keywords:** questioning, ELT, brainstorming, critical thinking, communication skills

### General Background

In the teaching and learning process, teachers are required to perform a variety of tasks to help students understand concepts and enable them to apply what they learn in different situations. This involves planning lessons, conducting classes, delivering content to clarify concepts, assessing students through questioning, and revisiting any areas where students face difficulties. In language classes, teachers must engage in several activities to help students develop proficiency in language use. Questioning is a particularly versatile and accessible tool for teachers. It is a crucial part of their teaching toolkit and may be one of the most significant activities they engage in. Teachers ask 86 percent of the questions in the classroom, which makes up about one-third of the classroom dialogue (Jumare, 2020). Nevtria and Puspita (2020) describe that the classroom questioning is a form of conversation that requires mutual understanding between the speaker and the listener. They further emphasize that questioning is

vital in the teaching and learning process, as it allows teachers to direct the class, engage students with the material, boost participation, and enhance comprehension.

Teacher questions play a crucial role in classroom interactions, as they foster student learning and engagement. The way questions are framed is important, as different types can have varying effects on learning outcomes. Referential questions, particularly those designed to assess understanding, are generally more effective for promoting learning compared to display questions. Types of questions include understanding checks, activity management questions, repair questions that address understanding or task completion, and topic elaboration questions. Varieties of questions work together to enhance classroom interaction and to support learning. However, it's important to remember that while questions are a key element in creating learning opportunities, they are not the only factor. As noted by Lightbown and Spada (2013), questions are necessary for evaluating how much students have understood. In practice, though, the understanding checks observed in the data did not effectively lead to students demonstrating their understanding. Therefore, if these questions were intended to confirm students' comprehension of the instructions, this goal was not met through the understanding checks used. Despite this, the teacher continued to employ such checks throughout instructional sequences.

A question is a linguistic tool used to request information, typically with the expectation that the information will be provided as an answer (Long and Sato, 1983). Cotton (1989) expands on this definition by describing questions as sentences that take on an interrogative form and function. In educational settings, teacher questions serve as instructional cues or stimuli that can introduce topics, guide students on what they need to do, and offer directions on how to approach learning tasks. Questioning is a widely used technique in teaching, especially within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern. It's important to note that teacher questions do not always take the form of direct interrogatives. For instance, the question "What can you see in this picture?" could be restated as the statement "We'll describe what is going on in this picture" or as the command "Tell me what you can see in this picture." Therefore, in the context of teaching, a question can be broadly understood as any teacher's utterance intended to prompt an oral response from students.

Although defining questions can be complex, certain categories are clearly distinguishable. Key categories include wh-questions, yes/no questions, display and referential questions, and open and closed questions (Ruiter, 2012). Wh-questions are identified by their linguistic structure, usually starting with words like "why," "what," "who," and similar terms. In contrast, yes/no questions are defined by the nature of the expected answer, which is either "yes" or "no." Display questions are those where the questioner already knows the answer, and the primary purpose is to complete the question-answer interaction (Dayal, 2016). These questions are particularly effective as they allow the questioner to control the conversation by initiating dialogue and making the response relevant, thereby influencing the interaction. In English language classrooms, the questions posed by teachers play a vital role in facilitating the teaching and learning process. Teachers must be aware of the different types of questions that can support students in learning the target language.

However, it is often observed that students do not actively participate, particularly when it comes to responding to teachers' questions. To overcome this challenge, teachers must adapt their questioning techniques and employ a variety of methods to encourage active student engagement. This research examines many studies sourced from Google Scholar, focusing on the importance of teacher questioning patterns in promoting student involvement in English language classrooms. Additionally, the study explores the classification of questions that teachers use during teaching English. The research begins with an analysis of the current questioning patterns employed by teachers and then reviews previous studies on the most common types of questions used in English classrooms.

Nordquist (2015) describes a question as a significant linguistic unit, such as a sentence or utterance, crafted to elicit information or responses from a listener or reader. The concept of a question goes beyond traditional interrogative structures, which typically involve question words, auxiliary verbs, and tags, and also includes declarative sentences delivered with a rising intonation. The significance of teacher questions in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom has been extensively examined. Similarly, Cotton (2011) claims that the use of questioning in classroom settings has ancient origins as Socrates also employed a questioning technique, now known as the Socratic Method, to guide students by challenging their assumptions, uncovering contradictions, and leading them to new insights and understanding. In today's classrooms, questioning functions as a tool to initiate and sustain communication. Teachers regularly use questions to stimulate student responses and to gauge their comprehension of the material being taught.

Chin (2002) emphasizes that classroom questions play a critical role in prompting students to generate explanations for things that puzzle them and to propose solutions to problems. These questions encourage deep thinking strategies that might not be activated without such prompts, thereby significantly engaging students' minds. They can help learners initiate processes like hypothesizing, predicting, thought experimenting, and explaining, which lead to a series of generative activities. These activities assist students in acquiring missing knowledge or resolving misunderstandings (Chin & Brown, 2000). Additionally, when students engage in discussions and activities around shared problems or tasks, one person's questions can inspire other group members to use similar strategies and thinking processes. Questions embedded in peer-group discourse thus help learners construct knowledge through dialogic and dialectic processes.

Richard and Lockhart (2011) identify several reasons why questions are a common teaching technique. Firstly, questions help to stimulate and maintain students' interest in the lesson. They also encourage critical thinking and keep students focused on the lesson content. Furthermore, questions allow teachers to clarify students' responses and to elicit specific language structures or vocabulary. Additionally, questions serve as an effective tool for checking students' understanding of the material and promoting their participation in the lesson. In the classroom, teacher questions can inspire learners, enhance their experiences, and help them develop awareness and response skills (Nevtria & Puspita, 2020). However, it is important to note that while questioning is crucial for student success, it does not always yield the desired results. Teachers sometimes fail to ask questions that truly engage students in interaction. To improve learning outcomes, teachers should carefully consider the questioning techniques they use. There has been ongoing debate about the effectiveness of the questioning methods employed by English teachers in language classrooms. The complexity of the vocabulary in these questions often makes it difficult for students to understand and respond, limiting their active participation in classroom discussions. Moreover, teachers frequently rely on display questions to assess students' comprehension of a topic, which may not always be the most effective approach (Ngadi, 2018).

Sujariati et al. (2016) emphasize that questioning tactics are methods used by teachers to ask students questions in order to gather information for teaching purposes. Similarly, Harvey (2001) asserts that the most effective questioning approach is one that actively engages students in the learning process. By encouraging students to participate in responding to questions, teachers can help them better understand the subject matter and improve their English language skills. This study explores how different types and techniques of teacher questions can entice students to respond and engage in classroom interactions during the learning process. To effectively elicit student responses, teachers may need to employ specific questioning strategies. William Willen (1991), in his book *Question Skills for Teachers*, outlines nine questioning approaches: **Develop essential questions** that provide structure and direction for the class. **Ask**

**questions clearly and explicitly** to avoid confusion. **Ask questions appropriate to the students' ability level** to ensure they can respond effectively. **Ask questions logically and sequentially** to guide students through the learning process. **Ask questions on a variety of levels** to challenge students and deepen their understanding. **Follow up on student responses** to clarify and expand on their answers. **Allow students time to think** before responding, which encourages thoughtful answers. **Use questions that encourage broad student participation** to engage more students in the discussion. **Encourage student questions** to foster curiosity and active learning. These all techniques can be applied to various types of questions in the teaching-learning process, whether they align with or challenge the material being taught.

Similarly, Brown (2007) identifies four key functions of teacher questions in classroom interaction:

**Motivate and provide opportunities for language production:** Questions give students the drive and opportunity to produce language comfortably. EFL students often hesitate to initiate classroom interaction without a prompt from the teacher. By asking the right questions, teachers can encourage even the quietest students to communicate.

**Stimulate student communication and interaction:** Questions can serve as a catalyst for student interaction. Sometimes, all it takes is one well-placed question to spark a discussion that students might otherwise be reluctant to begin on their own.

**Offer immediate feedback on student comprehension:** When a teacher asks a question, the students' responses provide immediate insight into their understanding of the content. This allows the teacher to quickly identify and address any difficulties with content, grammar, or pronunciation.

**Help students discover their own thoughts:** By responding to teacher questions, students can articulate their thoughts more clearly, which can help them understand their own perspectives and ideas more deeply.

These functions highlight the importance of strategic questioning in fostering a dynamic and interactive classroom environment. Thus, the teacher's questions can make students pay attention to the information of the materials. Cotton (2011) outlines several key purposes for asking questions in the classroom: **Develop interest and motivate students:** Questions are used to engage students and encourage them to actively participate in lessons. **Evaluate student preparation:** Teachers use questions to check students' readiness and to review homework. **Develop critical thinking skills:** Questions aim to cultivate students' critical thinking abilities and foster a questioning attitude. **Review and summarize lessons:** Questions help consolidate and revisit previous lessons to reinforce learning. **Nurture insights and expose new relationships:** By asking questions, teachers can help students see new connections and deepen their understanding. **Assess achievement of instructional goals:** Questions are used to evaluate whether the instructional objectives and goals have been met. **Stimulate independent learning:** Questions encourage students to seek out knowledge and pursue learning beyond the classroom.

Fries-Gaither (2008) explains that teachers ask questions for various purposes, including actively involving students in the lesson, increasing motivation or interest, evaluating students' preparation, checking the completion of work, developing critical thinking skills, reviewing previous lessons, nurturing insights, assessing achievement or mastery of goals and objectives, and stimulating independent learning. A teacher may shift their purpose for asking questions during a single lesson, and sometimes a single question can serve multiple purposes. Overall, research indicates that instruction involving questioning is more effective than instruction without it (Marzano et al., 2001). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2004) outline for each stage: **Introduction Stage** to establish human contact and rapport, set the stage for the lesson and activate prior knowledge, introduce the topic and create interest, and pose problems to engage students. **Presentation Stage** to maintain student engagement and focus, encourage logical thinking and reasoning, and check for understanding and clarity. **Application Stage** to help

students focus and clarify their thoughts, encourage students to make observations and draw their own conclusions, and address misunderstandings and provide individual assistance. **Conclusion Stage** to summarize and review key points of the lesson, assess the level of understanding and assimilation, and suggest further questions or problems for exploration. These purposes help guide the use of questions to enhance learning and ensure that students are actively engaged and understanding the material.

It is clear from the aforementioned goals and functions of inquiry that teacher inquiries play a big part in student engagement in the classroom. It can have a significant positive impact on kids' language development, classroom engagement, and language classroom goals. Therefore, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of instructors' questions in the English language classroom since they are essential in helping students acquire the language. Instructors need to understand the many kinds of questions that help students learn languages. Sadly, there is sometimes a tendency for student engagement to be passive, especially when it comes to answering queries from teachers. Teachers must use a variety of strategies to successfully adapt their questions in order to address this problem and promote active student participation.

It sounds like there's a significant focus on questioning techniques in English language teaching. The studies you mentioned highlight that while procedural and convergent questions are commonly used, there's a need for more divergent questioning to promote critical thinking and deeper understanding. The emphasis on knowledge and comprehension questions, as noted by Cook et al. (2018), suggests a gap in addressing higher-order thinking skills like application and analysis. These findings suggest that teacher training programs should place a greater emphasis on developing diverse questioning strategies. Encouraging teachers to incorporate a mix of questioning types could enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

The study by Cook et al. (2018) revealed that teachers in junior and senior high schools tend to ask more knowledge-level questions compared to teachers at other educational levels. These teachers also employ various techniques to adjust their questions when students do not respond. The prevalence of knowledge-level questions and the methods used to modify them are influenced by factors such as teachers' competence, students' abilities, the teaching context, and the instructional materials (Ernst-Slavit & Pratt, 2017). Similarly, Khadka (2021) found that effective teachers in Nepali schools utilize a range of question types, from lower-order to higher-order and follow-up questions, with a pattern of increasing frequency from lower to higher order. However, less experienced teachers tend to rely more on lower-order questions, while trained teachers use follow-up questions more frequently. These findings suggest that Nepali school policymakers and leaders could revise teacher development programs and policies to enhance teaching effectiveness. Additionally, teachers can gain valuable insights into their current questioning practices and work on improving them.

Pandey (2022) highlights that questioning has long been a powerful teaching method, valued for centuries for its ability to enhance comprehension and foster critical thinking. The study found that while teachers used both divergent and convergent questions, they prioritized divergent questions. These questions are considered crucial in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms as they allow for the exploration of multiple ideas. Most questions were posed during the 'while teaching' phase of the lesson. The study also concluded that teachers use questions primarily to motivate students, promote understanding, stimulate critical thinking, evaluate students, and engage them in classroom activities.

This study analyses different research reports sourced from Google Scholar, trying to find out the impact of questioning on motivating students' participation in English language classrooms. In the same way, it also explores the classification of varieties of questions asked by

teachers in English language teaching. The paper initially scrutinizes current questioning patterns employed by teachers before developing into existing research on the prevalent types of questions in English classrooms.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper is based on a narrative inquiry research study. The major focus of the study was the way teachers asked questions in the ELT classes and their views regarding the impact of their questions. The class observation and the in-depth interviews of eight English teachers from different schools of Rupandehi district were the major source of data gathering for the present study. The observation of grade XI or XII English classes of all the selected teachers and the interview session with the sample teachers provided with the required information. The information was recorded systematically in the notebooks as well as in the recorder and then processed systematically to come to useful results and findings.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The collected information from the class observations and the in-depth interviews of the English teachers teaching in grade XI and XII, the data were categorized, and processed on the basis of the research questions set for the study. The information gathered was categorized as the question types, reasons for asking, reactions of the students to the questions, reactions of the teachers for responses of students, and the questioning styles of teachers.

#### ***Questions asked in the classes***

Toyfade et al. (2013) in the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education presents different types of questions asked in the classes and categorizes the questions asked in the classes as **Convergent questions which are the** questions that are straightforward and limit responses, encouraging specific and focused answers, **Divergent questions are those** questions that are open-ended, allowing for a wide range of responses and exploration of various perspectives, **Focal questions** are the types of questions for which the students are prompted to take a position or justify a viewpoint, **Questions for Brainstorming that** aim to generate a list of ideas or viewpoints on a particular topic, and the **Funnel questions are the** type of questioning starts broadly and gradually narrows down to a more specific inquiry, often involving multiple questions. Likewise, Wrag and Brown (2003) proposed a different category of questions. The **Conceptual questions** which aim to elicit ideas, definitions, and reasoning from respondents, based on understanding of fundamental concepts and principles. The **Empirical questions** refer to the questions demanding answers based on facts or empirical evidence, often experimental findings or established data. The **Value questions** on the other hand, are those categories of questions that develop into issues of relative worth, merit, moral considerations, and environmental concerns reflecting on ethical dimensions and subjective judgments. In this regard, Khadka (2021) also describes the teachers' questions classifying them into three types: Higher-Order Questions related to the last four levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) Lower-order questions that belong to the first two levels of Bloom's taxonomy (knowledge and understanding) and Follow-Up Questions which are the type of questions asked to explore to get a more precise or deeper understanding of a topic.

In this study, it was observed that nearly all the teachers, seven out of eight participant teachers, primarily asked lower-order questions in their English Language Teaching (ELT) classes. These questions mainly focused on testing students' memory. Only one teacher was noted for occasionally asking higher-order questions, such as asking students to interpret a poem they had just studied, to explain why a particular story ended as it did, or to consider alternative conclusions for a text. Therefore, the questions in the classes were sometimes divergent, sometimes convergent, and sometimes of the brainstorming type, the study specifically focused on the use of higher-order, lower-order, and follow-up questions.

### ***Reasons for asking the questions***

In ELT classes, teachers ask questions for various reasons. When asked about their purposes for questioning, nearly all participants indicated that their main goals were to motivate students, assess their level of understanding, and manage the class. One teacher specifically mentioned aiming to develop students' critical thinking skills. During class observations, some questions were found to support this goal, such as "Why do you think this title is not appropriate for this poem?" and "What could be a more suitable title for the poem?" Additionally, some teachers used questions like "What did you understand about the life of the main character of the story we discussed yesterday?" to review previously taught content. Overall, the teachers were found to use questions for various purposes, all directed towards enhancing students' English language abilities.

### ***Reactions of the students to the teachers' questions***

In the English classes across different schools in Rupandehi, there were varied reactions from students to the teachers' questions. A notable observation was that students stopped engaging in side conversations when questions were posed. Teachers primarily asked questions when they noticed that students were not paying attention. When questions were asked, some students would look at the teacher, hoping to be chosen to answer, while others would try to avoid attention by hiding their faces, especially those sitting at the back of the class. Conversely, attentive students were usually seated at the front. In some classes, a few students expressed a desire to answer questions when given the opportunity. Students generally dislike being called on to answer questions due to fear of making mistakes and the potential for being reprimanded or ridiculed by their peers. This fear of embarrassment and the risk of making minor errors in front of the class contribute to their reluctance. In this way, teachers' questions served to regain students' attention and maintain control of the classroom environment.

### ***Reactions teachers to the students' responses***

During the class observations, I noted a range of teacher reactions to students' responses. Teachers displayed various positive and negative reactions based on the correctness of students' answers. Generally, teachers were pleased with correct answers but expressed dissatisfaction or sadness when students provided incorrect responses. In one instance, a teacher became extremely angry with a student who struggled to answer questions while teaching a simple story to a Grade XII class. The teacher's reaction was intense, approaching the student angrily, which created a tense atmosphere. He scolded and insulted the student for not answering correctly and advised the student to focus more on their studies. However, the teacher did eventually ask additional questions to the same student, only returning to the front of the class once the student provided a satisfactory answer. During the class observations, several issues regarding teachers' reactions to students' responses were noted:

**Interruptions and incomplete responses:** Some teachers did not allow students to complete their responses. Instead, they would interject and add their own comments or corrections before the student had finished speaking. This can disrupt the student's thought process and undermine their confidence in providing complete answers.

**Handling incorrect answers:** There were instances where teachers responded positively even to incorrect answers, attempting to guide students toward the correct information in a supportive manner. This approach can help maintain student engagement and reduce anxiety. However, there were also cases where teachers were overly critical of both correct and incorrect answers. For example, a teacher was observed complaining about students' performance despite them providing correct answers to four out of five questions. The teacher's dissatisfaction with students' English proficiency, despite their correct answers, was expressed in a negative manner, which can be discouraging.

**Negative reactions:** In one case, a teacher displayed an unfriendly demeanor and expressed complaints even about students' positive answers. This approach can demoralize students and

negatively impact their willingness to participate in class discussions. Complaining about students' performance, particularly in a negative tone, can lead to increased anxiety and reluctance to engage.

**Need for teacher training:** The reactions observed were often neither satisfactory nor constructive. Teachers' responses to students' answers need improvement, and training in effective questioning techniques and appropriate reactions could benefit both teachers and students. Proper training can help teachers provide constructive feedback, support students in developing their English skills, and foster a more positive learning environment.

**Wait time and questioning techniques:** The wait time for students to respond varied significantly. Some teachers waited too long, which can create discomfort and pressure for students. Conversely, some teachers would add extra questions if students took too long to respond, which could further discourage participation. A balanced approach to wait time is crucial; it should be long enough to give students a chance to think and respond, but not so long that it creates unnecessary stress or disrupts the flow of the lesson.

All this is the evidence that improving teacher training in these areas can help create a more supportive and effective learning environment. This will enable students to speak more freely, reduce anxiety, and enhance their ability to learn English effectively.

### ***Questions styles***

The way questions are asked and the nonverbal behavior of teachers play a crucial role in establishing a favorable learning environment in the classroom. Teachers' actions before, during, and after questioning can significantly influence students' learning experiences. Key factors include:

**Waiting time and attitude of the teachers:** The amount of time teachers wait for students' responses and their attitude towards the answers are critical. Teachers who wait patiently and provide positive feedback, including giving clues when students struggle, create a supportive atmosphere. This approach encourages students to participate more freely and reduces anxiety.

**Teachers' behavior towards students' responses:** My observations of the English classes of Rupandehi revealed varied behaviors among teachers:

**Supportive teachers:** Four teachers were calm and waited for responses, offering hints to help students when needed. Their positive and helpful demeanor contributed to a more encouraging learning environment.

**Rude or negative teachers:** Two teachers exhibited rudeness and were less supportive, impacting students' willingness to engage. Their behavior did not foster a positive atmosphere and could lead to reluctance in answering questions.

**Angry or intimidating behavior:** One teacher displayed an angry facial expression despite not using harsh language, which created fear and hesitation among students. Similarly, another teacher's frequent shouting caused students to become silent and anxious.

**Impact on learning:** Effective questioning and supportive nonverbal behavior are essential for reducing students' speaking anxieties and enhancing learning outcomes. Teachers who manage their questioning techniques and nonverbal cues well can create a more engaging and less intimidating learning environment.

Thus we can claim that the effectiveness of questioning in ELT classes is heavily influenced by how teachers manage their behavior and responses. Supportive and patient interactions help students overcome anxiety and improve their learning experiences.

### **Conclusions**

The teachers in Nepal and everywhere keep asking varieties of questions in the English classes for different reasons in different situations like to control the class, make the students attentive, judge their learning and so on. The impact of the questions in English classes depends upon how the questions are asked, what kind of non verbal behaviour is reflected on the teachers, the reactions of the teachers to the responses of the students and so on. This study found that the



teachers need to be aware of their reactions and the ways of asking questions to the students so that they can create anxiety free learning environment in the class which ultimately helps students develop well in using English. It was also found that the teachers need to be conscious about positively reacting and responding to the students' questions and supporting them with some clues to answer their questions in the class so that the students feel easy in responding to the questions of the teachers and the students' participation in every classroom activities can be encouraged to foster English communication skills, which in turn makes the ELT situation better in Nepal.

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