

## Research Article

# Teacher Questioning Techniques and Reading Growth in Iranian EFL Learners: From Preaching to Practicing

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of teacher questioning techniques on the reading comprehension of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners, Iranian English teachers' current questioning practices, and their attitudes about effective questioning in teaching reading. The quantitative phase employed a quasi-experimental design, in which pre-intermediate EFL learners were purposefully selected, but were later assigned randomly either to Higher-Order Questions (HOQs) group focusing on critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis or to Lower-Order Questions (LOQs) group focusing on check recall, recognition, and basic comprehension. Significant gains were reported for both groups from pretest to posttest, but the difference between them was not statistically significant. The thematic analysis of classroom observations (10 sessions) and semi-structured interviews with 10 experienced EFL teachers revealed that teachers relied mainly on LOQs (57.79%) but incorporated more HOQs (42.21%) during post-reading stages to promote deeper cognitive engagement. According to the interviews, it is suggested to choose a flexible and adaptive questioning approach which is adapted to learners' linguistic proficiency, cultural background, and lesson objectives and makes use of visual aids, interactive tasks, and scaffolded support.

## Introduction

Reading comprehension is an essential component of language acquisition, bringing about the development of language skills (Fitriana, 2018). However, it is a challenging task that requires effective instructional strategies (Nurul et al., 2017). In EFL contexts, in which learners grapple with deficiencies such as limited vocabulary, complex syntactic structures, and low critical thinking skills, we need teachers who actively engage students with the texts and employ effective instructional strategies. Research indicates that strategies such as scaffolding (Van de Pol et al., 2010), think-aloud (Fisher et al., 2011), and Question-Answer (Raphael et al., 2013) might assist students in this regard. Besides these, deep reading asks for repeated analysis of texts to uncover implicit meanings (Fisher & Frey, 2012), whereas direct vocabulary teaching improves comprehension by increasing learners' understanding of key terms (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). In addition, activating prior knowledge of the learners links the new information to the existing cognitive frameworks (Kintsch, 2012), and group work augments comprehension because of involving discussion and interaction (Gillies, 2016).

As another strategy, teacher questioning has been widely acknowledged as an effective pedagogical tool for reading instruction. It causes active engagement with texts, stimulates critical thinking, and invites learners to clarify ambiguities and make inferences (Chica Cárdenas, 2021; Kholisoh, 2021). Previous literature has demonstrated the benefits of questioning on reading comprehension. Systematic questioning improves learners' ability to predict, infer, and summarize information from texts (Fitriana, 2018), the SQ4R (survey, question, read, reflect, recite,

and review) strategy can help comprehension through active interaction with reading materials (Nurul et al., 2017), and effective questioning increases learners' motivation, confidence, and classroom participation (Irawati, 2019).

However, the heart of the matter is the type and quality of questions posed by teachers. Dharmayanti (2020) strongly suggested using a variety of question types such as literal questions, inferential questions, critical questions, and probing questions to address different levels of comprehension. LOQs generally need factual recall and closed-ended responses; however, HOQs ask for explanation, reasoning, and critical analysis (Ziyeemehr, 2016). LOQs may support classroom interaction because they guide the students through structured responses (Irawati et al., 2021), but they do not result in deep comprehension. HOQs significantly enhance reading comprehension because they promote deeper engagement and critical thinking (Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017).

Besides type and quality, timely and appropriate integration of questioning into different stages of the reading process is also important. Dung and Trang (2020) argue that questioning activates background knowledge, helps learners notice important details and textual relationships, and increases reflection and consolidation of understanding in pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages respectively. It also reduces cognitive overload for EFL learners and makes comprehension easier at pre-reading stage (Nguyen & Hong, 2022). Thus, establishing a balance between different questioning techniques is particularly beneficial.

Despite the acknowledged effectiveness of questioning, teachers face serious challenges in its implementation. Poorly designed or

highly complex questions might confuse the learners and block comprehension (Dung & Trang, 2020). Effective questioning, therefore, needs teachers who plan well and adapt their questions to students' linguistic and cognitive knowledge (Creswell, 2012). Nevertheless, most EFL teachers tend to rely on factual or LOQs that lead to rote memorization (Dharmayanti, 2020; Fitriana, 2018). Finally, although widely recognized as an effective teaching strategy, there exists little empirical research investigating the effectiveness of different questioning techniques (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020).

This lack of evidence is more pronounced in the Iranian EFL context in general, and in private language institutes in particular. As a result, it is not clear how teachers use questioning techniques in their reading classrooms or how much these strategies can influence Iranian learners' reading comprehension. Furthermore, there are a few studies investigating the effects of higher-order versus lower-order questioning techniques on reading comprehension. To fill these gaps, the following research questions were posed.

What types of questioning techniques are currently utilized by Iranian English teachers teaching in the English language institutes?

Is there any significant difference between the effects of using higher-order and lower-order questioning on the reading comprehension of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners in the English language institutes?

What are the suggestions made by Iranian English teachers regarding the use of questioning techniques in the reading classes?

## Review of Literature

Teacher questioning has long been recognized as a central instructional strategy

for promoting interaction, guiding learners' thinking, and facilitating comprehension in EFL classrooms (Radzuwan & Qrquez, 2019; Torabi & Maleki, 2022). Hassan and Dweik (2021) argue that effective questioning fosters interaction, curiosity, and language processing, emphasizing its role in connecting learners' prior knowledge with new linguistic input. Chica Cárdenas (2021) further maintains that questioning serves as a fundamental educational strategy for developing interaction, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Similarly, Teimourtash and Teimourtash (2021) demonstrate that effective questioning significantly enhances inferential reading comprehension among intermediate EFL learners, highlighting the pedagogical value of cognitively demanding questions.

Research on questioning techniques has consistently classified classroom questions into procedural, convergent, and divergent forms. Procedural questions manage classroom activities, convergent questions focus on factual recall and comprehension, whereas divergent questions encourage higher-order thinking and extended responses. Empirical studies reveal that EFL teachers continue to rely heavily on lower-order questions. Khorsand (2009), examining Iranian EFL reading comprehension tests, found that over 90% of teacher-generated questions targeted knowledge and comprehension levels, with minimal emphasis on analytical or evaluative thinking. Similar findings were reported by Barjesteh and Alipour Moghadam (2014) and Milawati and Suryati (2019), whose studies revealed the predominance of knowledge-based and low-cognitive questions in Iranian and Indonesian EFL classrooms. Astrid et al. (2019) also found that convergent questions dominated classroom discourse, despite teachers' claims that their questioning aimed

to promote higher-order thinking. Collectively, these studies suggest a persistent discrepancy between theoretical recommendations advocating cognitively challenging questioning and actual classroom practices characterized by factual recall and teacher-centered interaction. This lack of evidence on the comparison between scholars' suggestions and teachers' practice is one of the main gaps in the research on questioning.

Another significant issue identified in the literature concerns teachers' professional preparation. Several studies suggest that many teachers lack formal training in designing and implementing effective questioning techniques (Rahman et al., 2024; Sujiarti et al., 2016). Consequently, teachers may struggle to formulate clear, cognitively appropriate, and linguistically accessible questions. The difficulty becomes particularly apparent when teachers attempt to use probing questions, which require spontaneous follow-up responses and real-time instructional decisions (Dharmayanti, 2020; Irawati, 2019). Although studies acknowledge the pedagogical value of questioning, they also reveal that successful implementation requires considerable instructional expertise, flexibility, and awareness of learners' cognitive and linguistic needs. However, there is not enough evidence about the extent to which EFL teachers utilize different questioning techniques, most importantly the higher-order ones, in their classes.

A substantial body of previous literature has addressed the efficacy of questioning techniques in improving reading comprehension. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies consistently indicate that questioning facilitates learners' comprehension and engagement with texts. Moge (2019), Sinabariba (2020), Riswanto

(2022), and Andini et al. (2024) reported statistically significant gains in students' reading comprehension following the implementation of questioning techniques, particularly pre-questioning and open-ended questioning techniques. These findings lend support to Mousavian and Siahpoosh (2018) who demonstrated that pre-reading activities, including pre-questioning and vocabulary pre-teaching, enhanced learners' comprehension more effectively than traditional approaches. The effectiveness of questioning appears particularly evident when questions activate background knowledge, direct learners' attention to key textual information, and encourage inferential thinking during reading activities (Anisah et al., 2019).

The literature also highlights the role of questioning in promoting active participation and interaction in EFL classrooms. Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi (2017) found that certain question types significantly increased classroom interaction among Saudi EFL learners, while ineffective questions often restricted communication. Furthermore, Rahman et al. (2024) identified strategies such as rephrasing, repetition, simplification, decomposition, and probing as effective techniques for enhancing engagement and comprehension. Teachers and students unanimously perceived questioning positively, particularly when questions were adapted to learners' proficiency levels. Banitalebi and Ghiasvand (2023) further demonstrated that metacognitive questions and incomplete utterances functioned as forms of learning-oriented assessment, enabling teachers to assess learners' understanding while simultaneously extending classroom interaction. These findings stand behind earlier arguments by Cotton (2010) who emphasised the communicative and

participatory value of questioning in language classrooms.

Going beyond comprehension, interaction, questioning has also been found as one of the main reasons for the development of critical thinking skills. Blything et al. (2019) observed that students exposed to high-challenge wh-questions produced linguistically more complex responses regardless of reading ability or socioeconomic background. Their findings indicate that HOQs can stimulate deeper processing and richer language production. Likewise, Masduki (2022) revealed that questioning techniques such as probing, rephrasing, pausing, and translation encouraged learners to analyze and interpret texts more critically. Teimourtash and Teimourtash (2021) similarly found that explicit instruction in questioning techniques significantly improved inferential comprehension, suggesting that questioning enhances learners' analytical capacities. However, despite these positive findings, there exists little research comparing the effects of HOQ versus LOQ on pre-intermediate learners' reading comprehension. Finally, there is not enough research about Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes of the efficacy of questioning in reading classes.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that questioning techniques positively influence reading comprehension, classroom interaction, learner engagement, and critical thinking in EFL contexts. Nevertheless, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing research has focused broadly on questioning techniques without sufficiently examining the comparative effectiveness of specific questioning stages such as pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading questioning. Second, although numerous studies highlight the importance of

HOQs, empirical evidence continues to show the predominance of LOQs in actual classroom practice. Third, relatively few studies specifically target pre-intermediate EFL learners, whose linguistic limitations may require carefully scaffolded questioning techniques. Finally, most previous studies have focused on the effects of questioning techniques, they have not investigated what questioning techniques teachers use in their actual classroom or what suggestions teachers have for improving the situation.

## Method

### Design and Participants

Employing a mixed-methods design, this study investigated the effects of teacher questioning techniques on the reading comprehension of pre-intermediate EFL learners in Chabahar, Iran. The study followed a sequential explanatory structure consisting of three phases: (a) classroom observations, (b) a quantitative quasi-experimental intervention, and (c) semi-structured teacher interviews. The qualitative and quantitative strands were analyzed separately and integrated during the interpretation stage. The first phase explored the questioning techniques commonly used in reading comprehension classes, the second one examined the effects of HOQs and LOQs on learners' reading comprehension, and the final phase investigated teachers' perspectives and recommendations regarding effective questioning practices in EFL reading instruction.

The participants consisted of 30 EFL learners and 10 teachers from English language institutes in Chabahar, Iran. For the observation phase, 10 reading comprehension classes involving pre-intermediate EFL learners were selected through convenience

sampling. This sampling method was adopted because of accessibility and the exploratory nature of the phase. For the quantitative phase, 30 pre-intermediate EFL learners participated in the study. The learners were selected from intact classes and divided into two experimental groups, each consisting of 15 students. Their ages ranged from 15 to 27 years, with 14 male students and 16 female students. One group received instruction through HOQs, whereas the other group received LOQs. Due to institutional limitations and restricted access to additional learner groups, convenience sampling was employed. In the qualitative interview phase, the researchers interviewed 10 EFL teachers with experience in reading comprehension instruction. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of participants with varied instructional experiences and perspectives regarding questioning techniques. Combining learners' achievement and teachers' perspectives allowed the study to develop a broader understanding of questioning practices in the Chabahar EFL context.

### **Instruments and Materials**

#### ***The Cambridge English Test: B1 Preliminary (PET)***

The Cambridge English Test: B1 Preliminary (PET) was used to check the homogeneity of participants in terms of language proficiency. Only learners whose scores ranged from 120 to 159 were selected as the final participants. This score range corresponds to A2 and B1 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and was considered appropriate for identifying pre-intermediate learners. PET is a standardized English language proficiency examination developed by Cambridge Assessment English (2020), assessing four

language skills: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. The Reading section (32 questions) was administered within 45 minutes, the Writing section was done in 45 minutes, whereas the Listening section consisting of 25 questions was completed in approximately 30 minutes. The Speaking section was conducted as an interview lasting 12–17 minutes. Scores from all sections were averaged to determine the final result.

#### ***Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP)***

The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) was employed as the pre-test and post-test instrument in the experimental phase of the study. It consists of 100 multiple-choice items assessing grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. In the present study, only the reading comprehension section was used. It includes four passages ranging from 100 to 350 words, each one followed by five multiple-choice items. The questions assess learners' understanding of factual information, arguments, and conclusions (English Language Institute, 1979). The MTELP was selected because it has been widely used to measure English language proficiency and previous studies have reported acceptable reliability and validity indices for the MTELP. Previous reliability estimates indicated a KR-20 coefficient of .89, and concurrent validity studies reported strong correlations with TOEFL scores (Naqvi et al., 2023). However, a pilot reliability analysis was conducted using the current sample. The analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .81, indicating good internal consistency in the present context.

### ***Classroom Observation***

Classroom observation constituted the primary data collection instrument for examining teachers' current questioning practices. The researcher observed 10 reading comprehension classes across different English language institutes in Chabahar. Observations enabled the researcher to examine how teachers employed questioning techniques during reading instruction in real classroom settings. A structured observation checklist was developed to categorize questions according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Questions were classified as either lower-order (factual recall, identification, and yes/no questions) or higher-order (analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction, and synthesis). The checklist was pilot-tested with experienced teachers prior to the main study. The pilot testing process resulted in minor revisions to improve clarity and applicability. During observations, the researcher documented the frequency and types of questions used by teachers, making use of field notes to record extra contextual information related to classroom interaction and the implementation of questioning techniques. The combination of quantitative frequency counts and qualitative observations provided a comprehensive understanding of classroom questioning practices.

### ***Semi-structured Interview***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perspectives on effective questioning techniques in EFL reading instruction. Ten EFL teachers with expertise in reading comprehension instruction participated in the interviews. The interview consisted of open-ended questions focusing on the types of questioning techniques teachers considered effective, the situations in which they used these strategies, and the

challenges they encountered during implementation. To establish validity, the interview questions were reviewed by three experts in EFL teaching and reading comprehension. A pilot interview with two teachers was also conducted, resulting in minor revisions to improve clarity and relevance. Furthermore, triangulation was employed by comparing interview findings with classroom observation data and learner assessment results. This procedure enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings.

### ***Reading Materials***

Eight reading texts selected from the British Council website served as the instructional materials during the treatment sessions. These materials are appropriate for the present because it provides authentic yet pedagogically adapted reading texts which are suitable for English language learners at pre-intermediate learners. Besides, each reading passage is followed by carefully designed pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities that can be used for different question techniques at different stages. The texts address a wide range of everyday and academic situations, providing learners with meaningful language in realistic contexts. Furthermore, these materials are developed by language education specialists and are widely used by teachers and learners worldwide, contributing to their credibility and pedagogical quality. They enjoy clear organization, controlled vocabulary, and contextualized language which make them suitable for investigating instructional variables, such as teacher questioning techniques. There were two texts representing each of the following four genres: narrative, expository, descriptive, and argumentative. This was done to ensure variation in content and discourse structure. The texts were

approximately 400 words in length and were selected to match the proficiency level of pre-intermediate learners. The narrative texts included simplified literary excerpts and personal stories, the expository texts focused on informational topics such as technology and environmental issues, and the descriptive texts portrayed cultural events and landmarks relevant to learners' backgrounds. Finally, the argumentative texts addressed topics such as social media and education. To ensure appropriateness, the texts were evaluated in terms of lexical difficulty, syntactic complexity, readability, and overall suitability for pre-intermediate learners. This was done using Text Inspector. Each of these texts was covered in one treatment session. Exactly the same texts were taught for both experimental groups to ensure consistency, whereas the questioning techniques differed according to the instructional condition.

### Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in three sequential phases: the first phase focused on classroom observations, the second phase involved the quantitative and experimental intervention, and the third phase consisted of qualitative interviews with teachers. The observation phase aimed to identify the questioning techniques employed by EFL teachers during their reading comprehension instruction. Thus, ten pre-intermediate reading classes were observed across English language institutes in Chabahar. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from teachers and students. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. The researcher used a structured observation checklist which was developed according to the established

taxonomies of questioning techniques. Questions were categorized as lower-order or higher-order according to their cognitive demands. During classroom observations, the researcher recorded the frequency of each question type and took detailed field notes regarding classroom interaction and instructional practices. These notes provided contextual information that complemented the quantitative findings. The observation phase provided the baseline data regarding questioning practices in the participating institutes and informed the design of the subsequent intervention.

The second phase of the study employed a quasi-experimental design to make a comparison between the effects of higher-order and lower-order questioning techniques on learners' reading comprehension. Thirty pre-intermediate EFL learners participated in this phase and were assigned to two experimental groups of equal size. Before the treatment sessions, both groups completed the MTELP reading comprehension section as a pre-test. The pre-test established learners' baseline reading comprehension ability and ensured comparability between groups. The treatment phase lasted eight instructional sessions. During each session, learners read one authentic text selected from the prepared reading materials. Both groups worked with identical texts; however, the questioning techniques differed. The first group received instruction emphasizing higher-order questioning techniques. At the beginning of each session, the teacher presented the text by giving some background information and teaching the key vocabulary. Learners then read the text individually or in groups. During the instruction stage, the teacher posed questions that required learners to engage in deeper cognitive processing. These questions

encouraged inference, analysis, evaluation, and application. For example, learners were asked to infer characters' motivations, evaluate authors' opinions, analyze arguments, and compare ideas across texts. Following the questioning activity, learners participated in class discussions in which they explained and justified their responses. Reflection prompts were also used to encourage learners to consider how the questioning activities contributed to their understanding of the texts.

The second group, on the contrary, received instruction based primarily on lower-order questioning techniques. Similarly, each session began with an introduction to the text and vocabulary preparation. However, during the questioning stage, the teacher focused on factual recall and surface-level comprehension. Questions required learners to identify specific information, recognize main ideas, and recall details from the text. Examples included identifying characters, recalling events, and locating information directly stated in the passage. Later, the teacher reviewed the answers with the class and clarified difficult sections of the text. Learners also reflected on how the questions supported their understanding of basic information. At the conclusion of the eight sessions, both groups completed the MTELP reading comprehension section as a post-test. Comparing pre-test and post-test scores enabled the researcher to determine the effectiveness of the two questioning techniques.

The final phase of the study explored teachers' recommendations regarding effective questioning techniques in reading comprehension instruction. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 experienced EFL teachers. Before the interviews, participants received information

regarding the study and signed the informed consent forms. Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet setting and audio-recorded with permission. The interview focused on teachers' experiences with questioning techniques, their perceptions of effective practices, the adaptation of questions to different text genres and learner levels, and the challenges associated with implementing higher-order questioning in EFL classrooms. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The qualitative data generated through the interviews provided additional insights into teachers' beliefs, classroom practices, and pedagogical recommendations.

The qualitative data obtained from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework including: 1. Familiarizing yourself with the data, 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Searching for themes, 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes, and 6. Producing the report. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic and flexible approach for identifying patterns within qualitative data while remaining grounded in participants' experiences. The analysis began with repeated reading of the observation notes and interview transcripts to achieve data familiarization. Initial codes were then generated to identify significant features of the data. These codes were grouped into broader themes representing recurring patterns related to questioning practices and instructional strategies. The themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined before the final interpretation of the findings.

The quantitative data obtained from the MTELP pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using inferential statistics. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to examine changes

within each group from pre-test to post-test, while independent-samples t-tests were used to compare the post-test performance of the two groups. Before conducting the statistical analyses, the assumptions of parametric testing were examined. Shapiro-Wilk tests confirmed the normality of score distributions ( $p > .05$ ), and Levene's tests indicated homogeneity of variances. In addition to significance testing, effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's  $d$  to determine the practical significance of the findings.

## Results

To systematically analyze the observations, the data are categorized based on four key areas: question types, purposes, timing, and follow-up actions: Question Types (distinguishing lower-order questions from higher-order analytical questions), Question Purposes (comprehension, critical thinking, and engagement), Timing (pre-, during-, and post-reading), and Follow-Up Actions (probing or elaborating on student responses). Table 1 below summarizes the data for LOQs and HOQs.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Question Types*

| Question Type          | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Lower-order questions  | 115       | 57.79%     |
| Higher-order questions | 84        | 42.21%     |
| Total                  | 199       | 100%       |

Analysis of 10 classroom observation checklists revealed that teachers used a variety of LOQs, HOQs, and follow-up questions to support comprehension, critical thinking, and learner engagement. A total of 199 teacher questions were recorded across the observed lessons. As shown in Table 1, LOQs constituted the majority of questions (57.79%),

whereas HOQs accounted for 42.21%, indicating that teachers prioritized foundational comprehension while also attempting to develop analytical and reflective thinking skills. The number of questions varied across teachers, ranging from 12 to 29 per lesson, suggesting differences in instructional style and classroom interaction patterns. Teachers such as D, F, and G used a high frequency of questioning to maintain participation and monitor comprehension continuously, whereas others relied on fewer but more extended interactions. In Table 2, the information about different types of LOQs is presented.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics of Lower-Order Questions*

| Lower-Order Subtypes | Question Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Recall               | 55                 | 47.83%     |
| Yes/No               | 42                 | 36.52%     |
| Definition           | 18                 | 15.65%     |
| Total                | 115                | 100%       |

As Table 2 shows, among LOQs, recall questions were the most frequent subtype (47.83%), followed by yes/no questions (36.52%) and definition questions (15.65%). Recall questions were primarily used to check students' understanding of explicit textual information, while yes/no questions served as rapid comprehension checks. Definition questions focused on clarifying unfamiliar vocabulary and reinforcing lexical knowledge. This distribution demonstrates that teachers emphasized factual comprehension and vocabulary development, which are particularly important for pre-intermediate EFL learners. Although LOQs predominated, teachers also incorporated a substantial number of HOQs to encourage deeper

cognitive engagement. These are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics of Higher-Order Question*

| Higher-Order Subtypes | Question | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Analytical            |          | 27        | 32.14%     |
| Predictive            |          | 20        | 23.81%     |
| Synthesis             |          | 19        | 22.62%     |
| Evaluative            |          | 18        | 21.43%     |
| Total                 |          | 84        | 100%       |

In addition to LOQs and HOQs, teachers employed 71 follow-up questions, averaging 7.1 per class. These questions were generally used to extend responses, request clarification, or connect lesson content to learners' personal experiences. Questions related to students' daily lives, cultural practices, and opinions increased participation and helped contextualize abstract concepts within familiar settings. Such follow-up strategies contributed to a more student-centered classroom atmosphere by encouraging elaboration and sustaining interaction beyond textbook-based responses.

Analysis of questioning purposes further demonstrated that comprehension-oriented questions constituted the largest category (42.59%), followed by critical-thinking questions (31.11%) and engagement-oriented questions (26.30%). This pattern suggests that teachers primarily viewed questioning as a tool for checking understanding, while simultaneously attempting to stimulate analytical thinking and maintain learner involvement.

The timing of questions also revealed a clear instructional pattern, in which the number of questions increased as they continued the reading passage, reaching the

peak in post-reading stage. Most questions were asked during the post-reading stage (58.79%), compared with during-reading (23.62%) and pre-reading phases (17.59%). Pre-reading questions were mainly used to activate background knowledge and introduce lesson topics, whereas during-reading questions monitored ongoing comprehension and clarified misunderstandings. The strong emphasis on post-reading questioning indicates that teachers prioritized reflection, interpretation, and discussion, providing opportunities for analytical and synthesis-oriented interaction.

**Reliability and Normality:** Reliability of the reading comprehension test was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for pre-test and post-test scores across 20 items for both the HOQ and LOQ groups. The pre-test alpha values for the HOQ ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ) and LOQ ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ) groups indicated good reliability, suggesting that the test consistently measured reading comprehension at baseline with minimal random error. Post-test alpha values increased for both groups (HOQ:  $\alpha = 0.85$ ; LOQ:  $\alpha = 0.83$ ), reflecting improved internal consistency after the interventions. Ultimately, these results underscore the test's suitability for evaluating the interventions, as reliability remained robust.

Then, the researchers assessed the normality of the data distribution, a key assumption for parametric tests such as the independent-samples t-test. A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted for the Pre-test and Post-test scores in both groups. For all four datasets, the p-values significantly exceeded the conventional alpha level of 0.05. Specifically, the results were: Higher-Order Pre-Test ( $W = 0.96$ ,  $p = 0.69$ ), Higher-Order Post-Test ( $W = 0.94$ ,  $p = 0.32$ ), Lower-Order Pre-Test ( $W = 0.96$ ,  $p = 0.54$ ), and Lower-Order Post-Test

( $W = 0.91$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ). These indicate that the data are normally distributed. Given that the data meet the assumptions of reliability and normality, parametric testing was appropriate.

**Descriptive Statistics:** Table 4 presents reading comprehension scores for both groups across the Pre-Test and Post-Test

phases. For the HOQ group, the pre-test's mean 15.40 increased to 18.47, and the standard deviation 1.46 decreased slightly to 1.30, suggesting improved overall comprehension and more consistent scores among students.

**Table 4**

*Descriptive Statistics for Reading Comprehension Scores by Group and Test*

| Group | Test      | N  | Mean  | Standard Deviation (SD) |
|-------|-----------|----|-------|-------------------------|
| HOQ   | Pre-Test  | 15 | 15.40 | 1.46                    |
| HOQ   | Post-Test | 15 | 18.47 | 1.30                    |
| LOQ   | Pre-Test  | 15 | 16.07 | 1.95                    |
| LOQ   | Post-Test | 15 | 18.93 | 1.03                    |

In the LOQ group, however, the mean 16.07 and SD 1.95 in the pre-test changed to 18.93 and 1.03 respectively, reflecting improved reading comprehension and greater convergence in performance. Overall, both groups showed significant gains in mean comprehension scores and convergence in performance. To put it in a nutshell, HOQ group achieved a slightly larger mean gain of +3.07 compared to the LOQ group's +2.86, suggesting marginally greater overall improvement. While both groups benefited

from the interventions, the HOQ group achieved slightly larger average gains, whereas the LOQ group showed more uniform improvements.

**Baseline and Post-Intervention Comparisons:**

The results of Independent Samples t-test for Pre-test scores of both groups are shown in Table 5. It was necessary to check if the two groups were not significantly different from each other at the outset.

**Table 5**

*Independent Samples T-test Results for Pre-Test Scores*

| Test Condition              | Levene's Test (F) | Levene's Test (Sig.) | t     | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------|----|-----------------|-----------------|
| Equal variances assumed     | 1.79              | 0.18                 | -1.07 | 28 | 0.29            | -0.67           |
| Equal variances not assumed | -                 | -                    | -1.07 | 26 | 0.29            | -0.67           |

Levene's test yielded an F-value of 1.79 ( $p = 0.18$ ), indicating no significant difference in variances between the groups. Under the "Equal variances assumed" condition, the t-test yielded a t-value of -1.07 ( $df = 28$ ,  $p = 0.29$ ), with a mean difference of -0.67. These results imply that, on average, the HOQ group scored 0.67 points lower on the pre-test; however, this

difference was not statistically significant. Next, an Independent Samples t-test for Post-Test scores was conducted to determine the statistical significance of the final outcomes and check the possible impact of the interventions.

**Table 6**

*Independent Samples T-Test Results for Post-Test Scores*

| Test Condition              | Levene's Test (F) | Levene's Test (Sig.) | t     | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------|----|-----------------|-----------------|
| Equal variances assumed     | 1.59              | 0.22                 | -1.07 | 28 | 0.29            | -0.46           |
| Equal variances not assumed | -                 | -                    | -1.07 | 26 | 0.29            | -0.46           |

Table 6 summarizes the post-test independent-samples t-test results. Levene's test ( $F = 1.59$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ) again indicated that variances did not differ significantly. The t-test produced a t-value of -1.07 ( $df = 28$ ,  $p = 0.29$ ). The negative mean difference of -0.46 indicates the Higher-Order group's mean score was slightly lower than the Lower-Order group, though this difference was not

statistically significant. Overall, there was no significant difference in post-test performance between the two groups as a result of the two different methods of instruction. To determine whether reading comprehension scores improved significantly within each group, a paired-samples t-tests were conducted. The results of this t-test for within-group comparison is provided in table 7.

**Table 7**

*Paired Samples t-Tests for Within-Group Improvements*

| Group | t    | df | p-value | Mean Gain | 95% CI of Gain |
|-------|------|----|---------|-----------|----------------|
| HOQ   | 7.98 | 14 | < 0.001 | 3.07      | [2.24, 3.90]   |
| LOQ   | 6.76 | 14 | < 0.001 | 2.86      | [1.95, 3.77]   |

The data in Table 7 show a highly significant improvement for the Higher-Order group ( $t = 7.98$ ,  $df = 14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and the mean gain was 3.07 points. The Lower-Order group also showed a significant improvement

( $t = 6.76$ ,  $df = 14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with a mean gain of 2.86 points. Both groups experienced statistically significant increases in reading comprehension as a result of the instructional approach.

**Effect Size and Conclusion:** Finally, Cohen's *d* was calculated to quantify the practical magnitude of the difference in Post-Test scores between the two groups. Based on the mean difference of -0.46 and standard deviations of 1.30 (HOQ) and 1.03 (LOQ), Cohen's *d* was calculated to be -0.39. Based on conventional benchmarks, this represents a small effect size. The negative sign emphasizes that the HOQ group's post-test scores were slightly lower, though the practical significance is relatively minor.

The hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the effects of HOQ and LOQ on reading comprehension is supported by the findings. While both groups demonstrated statistically significant within-group improvements, the independent-samples *t*-test comparing post-test scores revealed no statistically significant difference. The small effect size further underscores that the observed difference in post-test means is trivial in practical terms. Thus, despite marginally larger gains in the Higher-Order group, both questioning techniques yielded statistically and practically equivalent outcomes, suggesting neither approach is superior for improving reading comprehension in this context.

The analysis of the interview data with the teachers revealed six main themes: Challenges in teaching reading comprehension, Strategies for enhancing reading comprehension, The nature and types of effective questioning, Deployment and sequencing of questions, Practical questioning practices and adaptations, and Pitfalls to avoid and recommendations for growth

### ***Theme 1: Challenges in Teaching Reading Comprehension:***

The first theme comprised of the difficulties that teachers face while teaching reading. In fact, Iranian pre-intermediate EFL teachers faced three significant areas of concern when teaching reading comprehension.

- ***Mechanical processing:*** Seven of the teachers complained that students treat reading merely as decoding words without grasping the general meaning and purpose of the text. This hinders deep comprehension as learners fail to connect words to broader text content. One teacher noted, "*Students treat reading as merely decoding, hence missing the main picture and aim...*".

- ***Contextual disconnect:*** Six teachers reported a failure among students to connect texts to personal experiences. A representative quote is, "*They read the text without linking it to their own experiences,*" which limits their ability to personalize and internalize the material.

- ***Superficial engagement:*** Six respondents highlighted that learners read without deep understanding, indicating a lack of critical analysis. They do not analyze the text, criticize the content, or react to that.

### ***Theme 2: Strategies for Enhancing Comprehension:***

The second theme incorporated the strategies and techniques that the teachers employed in order to deal with decoding and engagement issues.

- ***Visual aids and realia:*** Nine teachers reported using pictures, drawings, and props to make abstract textual content more tangible. This captures the attention of learners who might struggle with purely verbal explanations. One teacher explained, "*I started to use visual aids and short discussions...*".

- ***Interactive activities:*** Seven teachers utilized collaborative tasks such as group

discussions and think-pair-share to foster engagement. One teacher reported, “*I invite them to discuss in small groups before sharing..*”.

- Culturally familiar texts: Five teachers deliberately select texts reflecting familiar local scenes to enhance relatability and help students connect more deeply with the material.

**Theme 3: The Nature and Types of Effective Questioning:** The third theme encompassed the question types that teachers considered effective. They consistently emphasize that effective questioning techniques should not merely elicit factual responses but rather encourage personal interpretation and independent thought. Effective questions, in their mind, act as an invitation to think, providing clarity and establishing a safe space for students. For example, such questions are often open-ended and reflective, such as asking, “If you could describe the character using a simple word, what would it be and why?”.

**Table 8**

*Types of Effective Questions and Their Rationale*

| Question Type            | Frequency (Percentage) | Purpose and Rationale                                                                 | Sample Quote                                         |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Factual (literal)        | 8/10 (80%)             | Ensures students capture key details; builds a foundation                             | “I ask questions like, ‘Who is the main character?’” |
| Inferential / Reflective | 6/10 (60%)             | Encourages connecting details with personal experience and promotes critical thinking | “How might this event change what happens later?”    |
| Predictive               | 5/10 (50%)             | Stimulates imagination and anticipatory thinking                                      | “What do you imagine will occur in the next part?”   |

**Theme 4: Deployment and Sequencing of Questions:** This theme covered the timing of the questions. Experienced teachers believed that we should carefully structure the sequence of questioning throughout a reading lesson to scaffold learning, incorporating both types of questions. Table 9 below present information about the stage, the suitable type of question, and the rationale.

Table 9

*Suggested Order for Deploying Higher-Order vs. Lower-Order Questions*

| Stage in Lesson                           | Question Type                                       | Decision Criteria / Timing                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Early Stage<br>(Before/During<br>reading) | Lower-order (factual)                               | To build a basic understanding, check recall                                          |
| Later Stage (Mid/After<br>reading)        | Higher-order (analytical/<br>reflection)            | When students demonstrate<br>comprehension and readiness for more<br>profound thought |
| Suggested Ratio                           | Approximately 70% lower-<br>order, 30% higher-order | Adjusted based on class responses                                                     |

During early stages, teachers predominantly used lower-order questions to establish essential information. As the lesson progresses and students demonstrate adequate basic comprehension, there is a deliberate shift toward higher-order questions that promote deeper analysis. Following a flexible ratio of 70% lower-order to 30% higher-order questions maintains a natural learning curve.

**Theme 5: Effective Teaching Practices and Questioning Adaptations:** This theme dealt with the actual teaching practice of teachers, not the type or timing like previous themes. It includes the *specific methods teachers utilize to promote deeper thinking and active participation during lessons as well as the techniques they use to adapt their questioning techniques according to the students' proficiency level.*

- **Think-pair-share:** Students discuss in pairs before sharing their ideas with the class, which eases pressure and fosters collaboration.
- **Reflection Pause/Quick Scribble:** Giving students two minutes to jot down a sentence or draw an image helps them structure their thought and allows quieter students to participate.

- **Concept Clustering:** Asking students to list topic-related ideas in order to build a mind-map encourages them to recognize interconnections and deepens comprehension.

To accommodate students with varying levels of English proficiency, teachers need to adapt these techniques. Primary adaptations include using simplified language and supportive visuals (such as flashcards), allowing alternative response formats (like drawing on mini-whiteboards), and implementing peer pairing where lower-level learners work alongside more proficient classmates.

**Theme 6: Pitfalls to Avoid and Recommendations for Growth:** The last theme, concluding the discussion, includes the Dos and Don'ts of questioning. To maintain a supportive environment, teachers deliberately avoid certain types of questions.

- **Compound/multi-part questions:** Because they are bundling multiple demands into a single query overwhelms and confuses learners.
- **Overly abstract/academic language:** Because they are highly formal language or idioms can intimidate pre-intermediate learners and hinder participation.

- **Rapid-fire questions without waiting time:** Because they fail to give students time to reflect significantly increases classroom stress and results in rushed or incomplete answers. And lastly, for new teachers seeking to develop effective questioning techniques, experienced educators provided these recommendations.
- **Start simple, plan, and reflect:** Draft a clear, graded set of questions and continually adjust them based on classroom feedback.
- **Use training and networks:** Attend workshops, webinars, and participate in teacher communities for fresh ideas and support.
- **Peer observation and mentorship:** Collaborate with and observe experienced colleagues to learn practical ways to engage a class.
- **Leverage AI-driven tools:** Utilize AI-powered platforms for real-time analytics on student engagement to refine questioning techniques and receive personalized suggestions for improvement.

## Discussion

The findings revealed that teachers relied more heavily on LOQs, which accounted for 57.79% of all classroom questions, including recall, yes/no, and definition-based questions. This preference reflects common practices in Iranian EFL contexts, where teachers often prioritize classroom management and foundational comprehension through simpler forms of questioning (Banitalebi & Ghiasvand, 2023). LOQs function as scaffolding tools consistent with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy because they help teachers confirm basic understanding while maintaining efficient classroom interaction. However, excessive dependence on LOQs, especially yes/no questions, risks encouraging passive learning and limiting students' critical thinking development, which supports previous findings by Novitaningrum et al. (2020).

Although LOQs dominated classroom discourse, HOQs still represented 42.21% of all questions and included analytical, predictive, evaluative, and synthesis-based questions. Teachers mainly used HOQs during post-reading activities, where students had already established literal comprehension of the text. This sequencing aligns with previous research suggesting that HOQs can improve deeper text analysis and critical thinking skills (Azzalini, 2023; Espina, 2022). Nevertheless, evaluative questions remained underused, limiting opportunities for learners to practice argumentation and persuasive reasoning, a concern also noted by Truong (2024). Furthermore, although some questions personalized content and increased learner engagement, pre-reading stage questions were relatively neglected. This represents a missed opportunity to activate students' prior knowledge, which schema theory identifies as essential for successful comprehension (Bante, 2023).

The findings also supported adopting a balanced questioning approach in different stages of reading instruction, each one accompanied by an effective type and number of questions. Models such as Fisher and Frey's (2012) gradual release of responsibility also offer a practical framework in which teachers begin with simpler comprehension questions and progressively introduce more analytical and evaluative prompts. Research also indicates that structured questioning taxonomies can improve student-centered instruction and engagement (Mustafayeva, 2025). Accordingly, the study recommends targeted teacher training programs focused on designing HOQs, organizing question banks according to cognitive levels, and replacing overly closed questions with open-ended alternatives (Andini et al., 2024). These

adjustments may help teachers systematically develop learners' critical thinking while remaining sensitive to their linguistic proficiency.

Results from the quasi-experimental design showed that both groups improved significantly from pre-test to post-test. However, the difference between the effects of question type on the reading comprehension of the two groups was not statistically significant. These findings challenge assumptions that HOQs automatically produce better reading outcomes. Instead, they align with studies emphasizing the effectiveness of literal comprehension tasks for learners with lower proficiency levels (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018; Hezam et al., 2022).

The comparable performance of both groups can be explained through scaffolding theory and the cognitive threshold hypothesis. LOQs appear to provide essential support for learners developing foundational comprehension skills (Van de Pol et al., 2010). At the pre-intermediate level, students may require secure literal understanding before they can engage successfully with inferential or evaluative tasks (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). Although the HOQ group demonstrated slightly higher gains, suggesting possible long-term benefits for critical thinking, the immediate comprehension outcomes remained similar. The underrepresentation of evaluative questions in the findings might have also limited the opportunities for deeper analysis and argumentative language use (Espina, 2022).

These findings suggest that LOQs and HOQs should not be viewed as competing strategies but rather as complementary instructional tools. Teachers should begin with LOQs to establish foundational understanding and then gradually integrate

HOQs as learners' proficiency develops (Le & Nguyen, 2024). Such sequencing is particularly important in teacher-centered educational contexts like Iran, where students may be less familiar with open-ended, student-centered discussion practices (Fajria et al., 2024). The study therefore argues against universal claims that HOQs are always superior (e.g., Nourdad et al., 2018), emphasizing instead the importance of contextual factors such as proficiency level, classroom culture, and learner readiness.

The third research question examined teachers' recommendations for optimizing questioning techniques in EFL reading classes. Interviews revealed several recurring challenges, including mechanical decoding, weak connections between texts and learners' personal experiences, and superficial classroom engagement. These findings correspond with earlier research on EFL reading difficulties and schema activation (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023; Bante, 2023). To address these issues, teachers emphasized the importance of visual aids, interactive activities, and culturally relevant texts. Such strategies align with sociocultural learning principles because they provide contextual support and reduce cognitive load (Aravind & Bhuvaneswari, 2023; Le & Nguyen, 2024).

Teachers also recommended a scaffolded progression from factual questions toward inferential and predictive questioning. This sequence reflects Bloom's taxonomy and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where guided questioning gradually develops independent thinking skills. The suggested balance of approximately 70% LOQs and 30% HOQs demonstrates an effort to maintain both support and challenge within classroom interaction. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of professional

development, mentorship, and technology integration. Workshops, peer observation, and AI-assisted tools were viewed as valuable resources for improving questioning practices and enhancing learner engagement (Luckin et al., 2016; Masduki, 2022; Walsh & Sattes, 2015).

## Conclusion

The primary aim of the present study was to uncover valuable insights from experienced Iranian EFL teachers regarding the most effective questioning techniques in reading classes and to determine the effects of different questioning techniques on reading comprehension. It was demonstrated that effective questioning requires flexibility rather than rigid adherence to one questioning type. LOQs remain essential for scaffolding comprehension, especially among pre-intermediate learners, while HOQs should be introduced progressively to encourage analytical and critical thinking skills (Mustika et al., 2020). Successful EFL reading instruction therefore depends on adaptive pedagogy that aligns questioning techniques with learners' linguistic proficiency, cultural background, and developmental readiness. Besides, teachers believed that teachers need professional development and training in this regard through workshops and seminars, they need to employ differentiated questioning techniques according to the class atmosphere and to tailor their questioning to meet students' diverse needs, and they must consider the integration of technology and collaboration to enhance interactive questioning and foster a more collaborative learning environment.

Teachers are strongly suggested to make use of open-ended and probing questions, thus leading to deeper comprehension and critical thinking. They need to encourage

learners to engage actively with the text, check their understanding, and monitor their learning process. Teachers are also invited to integrate group discussions and peer interaction in their classes to create a collaborative learning environment. This way, learners are able to actively participate in constructing meaning and assisting each other in comprehension. This approach aligns with the social constructivist view that learning is a social process facilitated through interaction and collaboration. Another implication of the results could be that teachers need to attend workshops, seminars, and peer observations regularly, with a focus on reflective practice. In fact, the findings highlighted the need for structured learning opportunities in effective questioning techniques. Teachers need to adapt their question types to accommodate varying reading levels and adopt a personalized approach to teaching. This implies that teachers should move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and adopt differentiated instruction that addresses individual strengths and challenges.

The findings of this study are not generalizable to other EFL learners and contexts because the data was collected with a specific group of pre-intermediate EFL learners in a particular educational setting. Therefore, future studies need to address other levels and contexts. Besides that, variations in learners' cultural backgrounds or personality might affect their preference for certain question types and their engagement with the text. Thus, the findings might be quite different with other contexts, cultures, or participants. Future researchers can make a comparison with other cultures and countries or involve students from other countries. Furthermore, the study focused on the attitudes of teachers regarding effective

questioning techniques. Instead, future studies might need to consider the attitudes of students as well since they might hold quite different views.

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