

An Exploratory Study of the Effects of Teachers' Questioning Behaviours on Student Engagement and Participation in Oman

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Abstract: This study examines how teachers' questioning behaviours impact student engagement and participation in Omani EFL classrooms. Using survey data from 100 college students, the research explores students' perceptions of different questioning techniques and their influence on classroom interaction. Findings highlight key factors such as wait time, clarity of questions, use of student names, and question formats. These behaviours encompass aspects such as allowing adequate wait time, clarifying questions, addressing students by their names, and employing effective question formats. Overall, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding the role of teachers' questions in fostering active student engagement, thereby improving the overall educational experience.

Keywords: Questions, Engagement, Participation, Wait Time, Clarity of Questions, Calling Students by Names, Calling Random Students.

INTRODUCTION

Engaging every student in their education is a topic of permanent importance in educational literature. Numerous researchers emphasize the significant impact of student engagement on learning, with evidence demonstrating its positive correlation with academic outcomes (Mahdikhani & Rezaei, 2015; Weimer, 2015). However, talking to students about the importance of their participation is insufficient. Although students recognize the advantages of active involvement, they often display a preference towards passivity (Weimer, 2015). As an English instructor in an Omani college, my experience supports these assertions, as engaged students tend to be more motivated, retain knowledge better, and perform better in assessments and despite my consistent reminders regarding the value of participation, a considerable number of students tend to prioritize checking social media notifications, daydreaming, or passively observing, rather than actively participating in class.

Recognizing this issue has prompted researchers to investigate the factors contributing to student passivity, analyse them, and seek ways to maximize student engagement. It has been found that one such crucial factor is classroom interaction as Anderson (2003) explains that there is strong link between interaction and engagement and that making the improvement of teacher-student interaction is essential for enhancing students' engagement. Consequently, creating a learning environment that fosters student interactions has been recognized as a primary responsibility of teachers (Hamiloğlu & Temiz, 2012; Numan, 1991; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Notably, studies have shown that language teachers spend a significant portion of their instructional time asking questions, accounting for up to fifty-five percent of their teaching time (Cotton, 1988 as cited in Paramartha et al., 2018). Thus, teachers' questioning behaviour is considered an essential strategy for promoting and establishing classroom interaction (Loveless, 2023; Lynch, 1991 as cited in Hamiloğlu & Temiz, 2012). Undoubtedly, as a language instructor, I can attest that teachers' questions serve as the most common way to engage students, encourage them to answer, ask questions, express opinions, and share thoughts. Consequently, it becomes imperative for teachers to employ a diverse range of practices and strategies to create effective classroom interactions through following the best questioning techniques.

Given the dearth of studies examining the effects of teachers' questioning behaviour

on college students' engagement in Oman, the present paper aims to fill this research gap. It is based on a questionnaire completed by 100 college students. The results and analysis of the questionnaire are presented and discussed with reference to the existing literature review. The concluding section of the paper will highlight its limitations and propose pedagogical implications for fostering student engagement in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach, collecting data from 100 full-time students enrolled in an Omani college. Participants, aged 17 to 21, were randomly selected from the foundation program. A structured survey consisting of four frequency-based choices questions and two multiple-choice questions was administered to assess student perceptions of teachers' questioning behaviors (Appendix A).

The administration of the questionnaire took place during class visits during which students were provided with the questionnaire via email for their responses. Each statement and item in the questionnaire were thoroughly translated to the students' mother tongue. This step was crucial to address potential obstacles in comprehension, particularly for students at an elementary level of English proficiency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

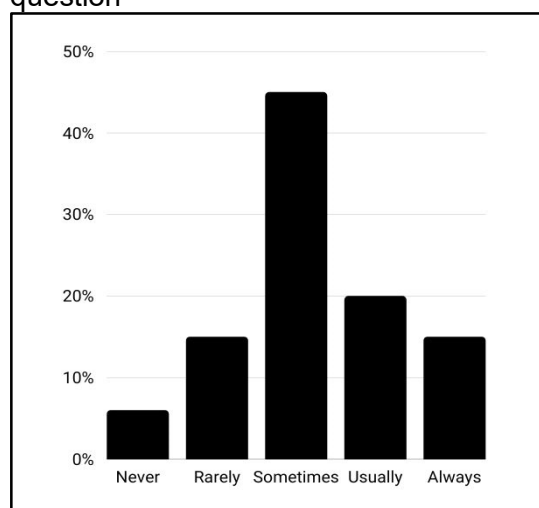
Questioning Techniques and Students' Involvement

Survey results indicate that several aspects of teacher questioning significantly impact student engagement. These include clarity of questions, wait time, addressing students by name, random selection of students, and question formats.

Clarity of Questions

The statement "I don't raise my hand to answer because I don't understand the question" aimed to examine students' reluctance to raise their hands to answer questions due to a lack of understanding it.

Figure 1: Responses to "I don't raise my hand to answer because I don't understand the question"



The results indicate, as shown in Figure 1, that a substantial number of students, 45%, reported "Sometimes" refraining from raising their hands to answer questions due to a perceived lack of understanding. Additionally, 20% of the students stated that they "Usually" experienced this hesitation to participate, while 6% claimed they "Always" felt this way.

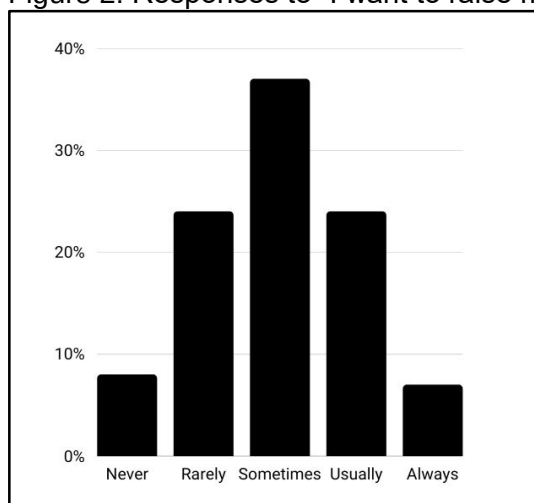
The findings strongly emphasize that the questions that students do not fully understand act as a significant impediment to their active participation. As illustrated above, most students stated that they face this issue in a relatively high frequency; however, this hinder is not new as Jakwerth et al. (1999) found in an investigation of "why students do not respond to questions" 24 years ago that a number of students could not reach the answer to a question because they did not understand what the question was asking. To put an end to

this, it is crucial to use clear and concise language when formulating questions (Marangell, 2021). Ma (2008) further explained that it is crucial for teachers to carefully consider their objectives from students before posing questions, and subsequently they should be careful in choosing words that students are familiar with to build those questions.

Wait Time

In the first statement of the questioning techniques section “I want to raise my hand, but I don’t get the time I need to think” participants were requested to rate their responses from never to always. This item of the survey aimed at measuring the significance of giving students time to think before inviting someone to answer the question.

Figure 2: Responses to “I want to raise my hand, but I don’t get the time I need to think”



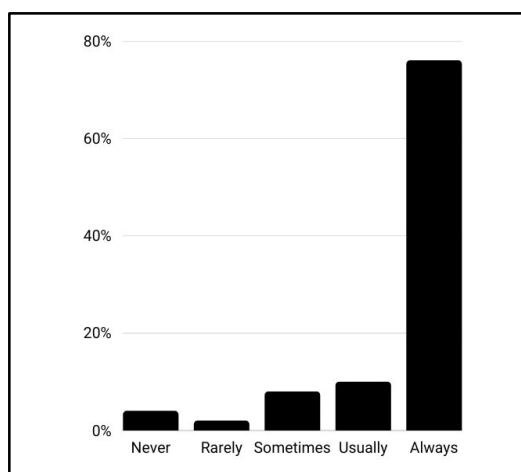
As figure 2 shows, the majority of participants fell into the "Sometimes" category (36%), suggesting a desire to participate but reported a lack of sufficient time to think of the needed answers which leads them not raise their hands sometimes and remain passive. A significant proportion of participants (31%) indicated experiencing this time constraint more frequently, falling into the "Usually" and "Always" categories. A smaller percentage indicated rare (24%) or never (8%) encounters with this issue.

The results emphasize the importance of a giving students time to think of the question before inviting a student to respond. This gap of silence is often referred in the literature review as “wait time” and it should last for 3-4 seconds or longer for questions that require higher-order thinking (Naz et al., 2013). In line with the results of this study, previous case studies revealed an occasional trend of insufficient wait time provided by teachers, which may lead students to feel rushed or pressured to respond quickly and thus prefer to remain passive (Richards and Nunan, 1990; Shomoossi, 1997). This highlights the positive role of wait time as it gives students an opportunity to process the question, formulate their thoughts, and prepare their responses which results in promoting the class overall participation (Graham, 2007; Paramartha et al., 2018; Ragawanti, 2009; Sundh, 2017).

Calling Students by their Names

Participants were asked to respond to the statement, “When the teacher calls me to answer by my name, I feel special and more involved” to highlight the impact of calling them by name on their sense of involvement.

Figure 3: Responses to “When the teacher calls me to answer by my name, I feel special and more involved”



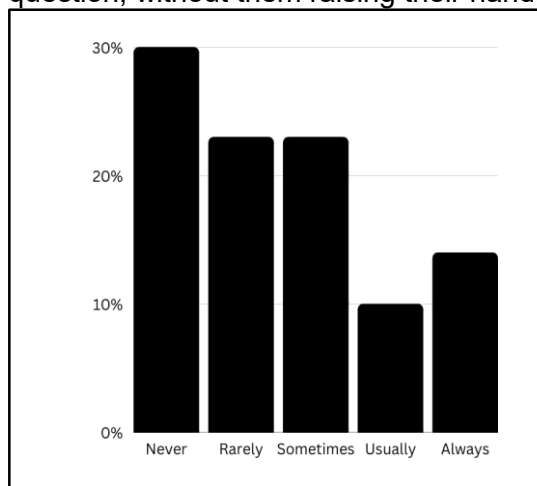
As depicted in Figure 3, the majority of students (76%) expressed that they “Always” experience a sense of being special and included when teachers call them by their names. A smaller proportion of students (18%) stated that they “Usually” or “Sometimes” get this feeling by being addressed by their names, while only 6% of them indicated that they “Rarely” or “Never” feel special and involved when the teacher calls them by their names.

These responses show a strong preference among students for being called by name and that this practice makes them feel more valued and thus involved. This finding goes in line with previous research that mentioned that learning and using students’ names is a fundamental teaching practice, as it acknowledges their existence and importance (Al-Jadidi, 2009; Glenz, 2013). Al-Jadidi (2009) explained that if the teacher does not know their students’ names, students will likely believe that their participation would go unrecognized and unremembered. Glenz (2013) added that teacher who doesn’t take the time to learn their students’ names is often perceived as disinterested and unapproachable and will have a negative effect on students’ willingness to participate. Consequently, Cieniewicz (2009) attributed the limited participation in the class he attended for observation to the fact that the professor did not use student names.

Calling Random Students to Answer

Participants responded to the statement, “I like it when the teacher asks random students to answer questions without them raising their hands. It keeps me alert.” The obtained data were analysed below to understand students’ preferences and the frequency with which they found this questioning technique effective in maintaining their attentiveness and involvement.

Figure 4: Responses to “I like it when the teacher asks random students to answer the question, without them raising their hands. This keeps me alert”



The findings exhibit mixed preferences among Omani students regarding the practice of teachers randomly selecting students to answer questions. As appeared in Figure 4, a considerable proportion of students (30%) reported that they “Never” liked this technique. 23% of them indicated that they “Rarely” liked it. On the other hand, 14% of the students indicated that they “Always” liked choosing random students to answer as it supported being alert in the classroom. The remaining 33% (comprising 23% “Sometimes” and 10% “Usually”) indicated that they were open to the approach but did not consistently favour it.

These diverse preferences among Omani students indicate that there is, as Weimer (2009) mentioned, no universally “right” approach when it comes to calling random students or waiting for volunteers in the classroom and that the success or failure of participation techniques relies heavily on the manner of their implementation.

The proportions of students who reported “Never” or “Rarely” liking the approach could be contributed to anxiety, as it has been found in previous research that calling random students to answer provokes extensive anxiety and it weakens students’ confidence and the willingness to participate in class (Weimer, 2009). However, Wilen (2001, as cited in Ragawanti, 2009) observed that solely nominating students who volunteer can result in a limited number of students engaging in class discussions. Consistent with this finding, Swope (2009) also found that those who are hesitant to raise their hands often contribute valuable and interesting insights when called upon. He further explained that even though the responses are often incorrect or not well-articulated, they stimulate profound discussions because the class can pause and analyse the answers which makes the process beneficial in fostering students’ confidence and motivation to participate further. In a quantitative study conducted by Ragawanti (2018) it was found that the random nomination technique is preferred by most students. Ragawanti (2018) attributed this to its ability to keep students attentive. Ragawanti (2018) also found through interviewing students that choosing a student randomly to answer a question encourages all students to get ready to answer every question. This aligns with the current study, suggesting that some students perceive random questioning as an effective method to sustain attentiveness and active involvement during class discussions.

The Format of the Questions

In the last two items of the survey, participants were given a pair of questions in each item, and they were requested to choose “Which of the questions appears to create a friendlier atmosphere, encouraging you to respond openly and freely?”. All the mentioned questions are common in English class in Oman. This part aims to test if the format of question can be a factor the effects students’ engagement and willingness to participate.

Table 1: Responses to “Which of the questions appears to create a friendlier atmosphere, encouraging you to respond openly and freely?”

	A		B	
1	What do you know about [topic]?	28%	What comes to your mind when you think of [topic]?	72%
2	Is it clear?	21%	What part shall I repeat?	79%

The first pair of questions are often used to start a new topic. As illustrated in table 1, question B is favoured by 44% more than question A as 28% of respondents voted for question A opposing to 72% for question B. One possible interpretation is that question A “What do you know about [topic]?” might sound like if the teacher is looking for a piece of information about a certain topic. This might make student hesitate to share whatever they know as they might feel that maybe what they have in mind is not worth sharing or even inaccurate. In question B, on the other hand, there is no wrong answer which creates a safer atmosphere in the classroom. This goes in line with what Jiménez (2017) observed that when the teacher slightly altered the question to “What comes to your mind when you think of fossils?” anxiety got reduced and wider participation achieved, allowing the teacher to quickly assess the students’ background knowledge. Additionally, students would not be

incorrect.

The second set includes question formats that elicit individual inquiries and are usually used after a topic is covered. The results indicate that there is a substantial preference among the participants, with 79% favouring question B, "What part shall I repeat?" compared to question A, "Is it clear?," which received 21% of the responses. Loveless (2023) provided an explanation for this as he implied that some question formats that aims to check whether students understood the taught material or not put the responsibility on the student as it is their fault if they do not understand. Agreeably, Jiménez (2017) explained that this question implies that questions would not exist if the students had been attentive. Jiménez (2017) added that such formats should be replaced with "healthier" alternatives that express the presumption of the existence of questions and the expectation of raising them which is seemed to be delivered in question B, "What part shall I repeat?", of the present study.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations of this study are associated with the method of data collection and the applicability of the findings to a broader context. The findings are relied on students' self-reported perceptions which may be subject to biases or inaccuracies. Future research could incorporate classroom observations and additional metrics to validate the findings more objectively. Additionally, the study's sample was limited to a group of students from a college in Oman, and expanding the research to different educational levels and cultural contexts would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of questioning techniques on student participation. Moreover, investigating the potential impact of other factors such as follow-up questions, types of questions, and feedback, would provide valuable insights into the topic.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to measure how EFL students in Oman perceive teachers' questions and how these questions can either facilitate or hinder their active involvement in the classroom. A survey completed by 100 college students was used as a method of data collection.

The findings of the present study highlight the significance role of several aspects of teacher questioning behaviour in shaping student engagement and participation. Clear language when formulating questions was identified as crucial. Additionally, providing sufficient wait time before inviting students to answer questions was recognized as a critical practice to allow students to process the question and formulate thoughtful responses. Addressing students by their names was found to be a highly appreciated practice, making them feel valued and fostering a sense of inclusivity in the classroom. Moreover, randomly selecting students to answer questions garnered diverse preferences among Omani students. While some students found this approach effective in keeping them alert and actively involved, others expressed hesitance or discomfort due to potential anxiety associated with being called upon. The format of questions also played a significant role in students' willingness to respond openly and freely. Questions that encouraged open-ended responses without the fear of providing incorrect answers were favoured, creating a more welcoming and encouraging atmosphere for student participation.

The pedagogical implications derived from this study hold the potential to foster more inclusive and engaging classroom environments. By refining their questioning techniques, teachers can create a supportive and interactive atmosphere that encourages active student participation, leading to enhanced academic outcomes and overall educational experiences for EFL students in Oman and beyond.

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