

Strategic Integration of Using Questioning Strategies to Promote Students' Thinking Ability in English Foreign Language Learning (EFL)

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the role of questioning strategies in developing students' cognitive and metacognitive skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, relevant studies published between 2015 and 2025 were systematically identified and analyzed from databases such as Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect. The selected studies were evaluated based on the inclusion criteria, with a focus on questioning strategies, cognitive development, and metacognitive awareness. The analysis reveals that well-structured questioning, particularly open-ended, probing, and reflective types, significantly enhances learners' higher-order thinking abilities—including analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—while also strengthening metacognitive processes such as planning, monitoring, and self-assessment. These questioning techniques foster a deeper understanding, promote independent learning, and encourage sustained engagement among EFL students. The findings indicate that high-level cognitive and reflective questions are the most effective in fostering critical and self-regulated learning. In conclusion, the study highlights that integrating systematic questioning into classroom instruction can foster critical thinking, enhance learning outcomes, and support students in developing into autonomous and reflective learners in EFL contexts.

Keywords

EFL; Questioning Strategies; Strategic Integration; Thinking Ability

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, one of the major challenges that continues to emerge is the limited development of students' cognitive and metacognitive abilities. Many students still rely on memorization and passive learning rather than engaging in analytical and reflective thinking. This issue has significant implications for how learners effectively acquire and use English. According to EF-EPI (2024), Indonesia ranks 79th out of 113 countries worldwide, categorized as having low proficiency, indicating that most students struggle not only with language use but also with higher-order cognitive skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. A national survey by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2024)



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reveals that more than 60% of students encounter difficulties in applying cognitive strategies during English reading and writing activities. These findings highlight that EFL learners often possess declarative knowledge (vocabulary and grammar) but lack procedural and metacognitive control needed for critical and meaningful communication. Therefore, investigating how cognitive and metacognitive processes develop in EFL learning contexts is crucial for enhancing students' problem-solving, reasoning, and self-regulated learning abilities. This research becomes particularly important as it provides insights into how questioning strategies can be designed to foster deeper thinking and active participation in English classrooms.

Cognitive processes involve both procedural and declarative knowledge, which influence how a person processes information and adapts to different situations. In the learning process, cognitive and metacognitive skills play a crucial role in helping students gain a deeper understanding and enhance their critical thinking. Cognition refers to the mental activities that enable individuals to acquire knowledge, interpret their surroundings, and solve problems through various developmental stages and interactions with the environment. It covers abilities such as thinking, analyzing, and controlling actions, which are explained by several theories, including the developmental theory of intelligence and the adaptive control of thought theory. These ideas have been examined in various studies, for example, research on the use of game-based learning to support vocabulary development among junior high school students (Flavell, 2020)(R. P. Clark, 2020)(Ketelhut & Schifter, 2023)(Israel-Fishelson & Hershkovitz, 2020). Meanwhile, metacognition refers to an individual's awareness and understanding of their own thought processes, along with the ability to manage and direct their learning. It consists of two main aspects: knowledge of cognition (understanding which strategies to use) and regulation of cognition (planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning activities). With metacognitive skills, learners can become more effective because they can select and apply strategies that improve their learning results (Schraw & Dennison, 2020)(Livingston, 2018)(Bahufite et al., 2023)(Ahdhianto et al., 2020)(Paludo & Montresor, 2024)(Mazari, 2025)(Firmansyah, 2025). Ultimately, achieving educational objectives is closely linked to the quality of classroom learning, which depends on students' active participation throughout the learning process.

Questioning plays a crucial role in fostering cognitive growth and critical thinking. It stimulates a range of cognitive processes, starting from simple knowledge recall to complex evaluation. Well-designed questions can reveal hidden assumptions, clarify ideas, and assess reasoning, allowing learners to engage in deeper exploration and problem-solving (Kholisoh & Linggar Bharati, 2021). (The Socratic method highlights the importance of continuous questioning to search for truth, test perspectives, and encourage self-reflection through critical dialogue (L. W. Anderson & Krathwohl, 2019)(Elder & Paul, 2020)(Wiwin et al., 2022). Questioning strategies are structured approaches used by teachers to stimulate critical thinking, encourage active participation, and improve students' understanding. These methods employ a range of question types, from open-ended inquiries to more complex ones, designed to challenge students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize knowledge. Through such strategies, teachers can promote inquiry-based learning, lead class discussions, and evaluate comprehension across different levels of cognition (Dewey, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The importance of questioning in developing cognitive and metacognitive skills has been widely recognized (Bao, 2020)(Black & William, 2019)(Febriyanti, 2023). It is also a central element in formative assessment and feedback. When questions are well-crafted, they stimulate higher-order thinking and support deeper learning (Torrance, 2016). However, the effective application of these strategies still faces challenges, particularly due to insufficient teacher training in creating and managing questions that enhance cognitive and metacognitive growth (Black & Wiliam, 2019). In many cases, teachers rely heavily on low-level recall questions, which limit opportunities for students to engage in critical or higher-level thinking (Santrock, 2015)(Southworth, 2022)(Davids & Rinquest, 2024).

Although questioning strategies are acknowledged as essential, further investigation is still required to explore how they can be applied effectively to improve both cognitive and metacognitive

skills more comprehensively. This study aims to examine the use of questioning strategies in classroom contexts to support these skills (Bragg et al., 2021)(Hågemark & Gärdenfors, 2025). Cognitive skills encompass a range of mental abilities essential for learning and problem-solving. These include analytical, creative, and practical intelligence, which allow individuals to adapt to different situations (Celik et al., 2021)(Ardena & Fatimah, 2021)(Nobutoshi, 2023). Flavell highlights that cognitive skills also require self-awareness and the ability to manage learning strategies. Similarly, Anderson and Reder describe cognitive skills as processes such as perception, memory, attention, and reasoning, which can be improved through training and practice (R. C. Anderson & Pearson, 2020)(Purnomo et al., 2024)(Skehan, 2018). Together, these perspectives demonstrate that cognitive skills form the foundation not only for acquiring knowledge but also for enhancing overall learning and cognitive performance.

In summary, metacognition is a complex concept that combines both awareness and regulation of one's cognitive activities. It is often described as "thinking about thinking," emphasizing reflection on one's learning strategies and abilities. Metacognition has two main aspects: metacognitive knowledge, which involves understanding strategies and learning tasks, and metacognitive regulation, which includes planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning processes. Moreover, metacognitive skills are closely linked to self-regulated learning, as they enable learners to set goals, plan actions, and monitor their own progress. These skills are crucial for enhancing learning effectiveness and adaptability in diverse educational settings (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2018). In monitoring and evaluating learning activities, learners can become more effective by utilizing metacognitive skills, which enable them to select and apply strategies that enhance their learning outcomes. Ultimately, achieving educational objectives is closely linked to the quality of classroom learning, which depends on the active participation of students throughout the learning process.

Cognitive and metacognitive skills are significantly influenced by the questioning strategies that teachers employ in the classroom. Such strategies serve as a trigger to activate students' cognitive abilities, including thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving, while also enhancing their metacognitive skills, such as self-reflection, monitoring, and learning regulation. When teachers use effective questioning—particularly those designed to stimulate higher-order thinking—students are encouraged to critically analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information. These questions not only deepen understanding but also inspire learners to connect ideas and apply their knowledge in meaningful ways.

Additionally, questioning techniques that prompt students to reflect on their thought processes help build metacognitive awareness. By evaluating their reasoning and considering the strategies they employ in learning, students develop essential skills such as planning, monitoring, and self-assessment. This combined impact on cognitive and metacognitive growth fosters a more engaging, self-directed learning environment, which contributes to better academic outcomes and supports lifelong learning (Santyasa et al., 2020)(Kemmerer, 2022)(Flower & Hayes, 2019). This study examines how questioning techniques can be applied to strengthen students' cognitive and metacognitive development.

2. METHODS

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant studies concerning cognitive and metacognitive processes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The SLR approach was selected because it ensures a transparent and replicable process for summarizing existing evidence, while also identifying research gaps that require further exploration. The purpose of using this method is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how questioning strategies and metacognitive regulation contribute to the development of critical thinking and self-regulated learning among EFL learners.

The SLR process in this research follows a structured and rigorous framework consisting of several key stages. *First*, the formulation of research questions was carried out to define the focus of the review, which was: *“How do cognitive and metacognitive processes contribute to the development of critical thinking and questioning strategies in EFL contexts?”* This guiding question served as the foundation for identifying and analyzing related studies. *Second*, the identification of relevant literature was conducted by searching multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, as these databases provide access to peer-reviewed publications in education, psychology, and linguistics.

Third, the search strategy employed specific keywords and Boolean operators to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. The main search terms included *“cognitive process,” “metacognitive awareness,” “questioning strategy,” “critical thinking,” “EFL learning,” and “language learning strategies.”* These terms were combined using AND and OR to refine search results (e.g., *“metacognition AND EFL”* OR *“questioning strategies AND critical thinking”*).

Fourth, the selection of studies was based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria consisted of: (a) studies published between 2015 and 2025, (b) articles written in English, (c) peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, or book chapters, and (d) research focusing on EFL/ESL learning, cognitive or metacognitive development, and critical thinking or questioning strategies. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included: (a) articles without full-text access, (b) studies unrelated to the context of language education, and (c) publications in non-academic formats such as blogs, editorials, or opinion papers.

Fifth, the screening and analysis process began with the removal of duplicate records, followed by title and abstract screening to ensure relevance. Articles that met the initial criteria were then subjected to full-text analysis. During this stage, data were extracted systematically based on research focus, participants, methodologies, instruments, and main findings. The extracted data were then analyzed through qualitative content analysis, with a focus on identifying recurring patterns, emerging themes, and gaps within the literature.

In total, 147 studies were initially identified through database searches. After the screening and eligibility assessment, 38 studies were retained for final analysis. These selected studies were deemed highly relevant to the research objectives, as they provide both empirical and theoretical insights into how cognitive and metacognitive processes enhance learners’ questioning ability, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning in EFL classrooms. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was used to visualize the selection process, depicting the flow of studies from identification to final inclusion.

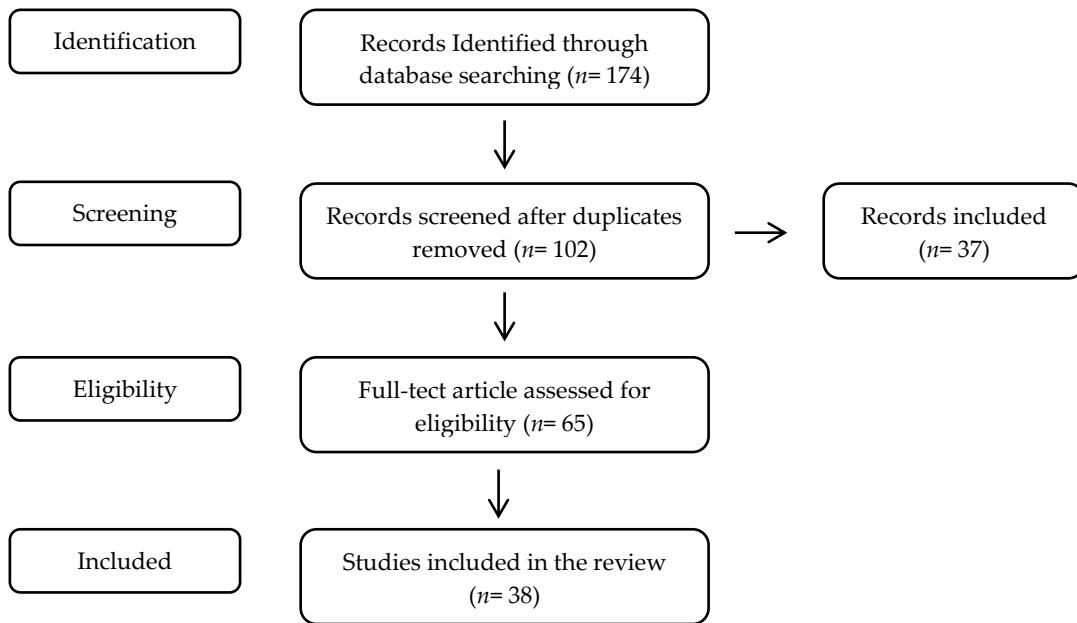


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

The SLR ensures rigor, transparency, and replicability by adhering to established review protocols. It provides a comprehensive and evidence-based framework for understanding current trends and challenges, while identifying research gaps that can inform future studies on the cognitive and metacognitive development of EFL learners.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Enhancing Cognitive Abilities through Questioning Techniques

This section presents the findings of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on how questioning techniques enhance students' cognitive and metacognitive skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts. A total of 38 studies published between 2015 and 2025 were analyzed using a thematic grouping approach. The analysis identified three major themes: (1) the impact of questioning on cognitive skill development, (2) the influence of questioning on metacognitive regulation, and (3) the pedagogical strategies used by teachers to integrate questioning into EFL classrooms.

Distribution and Citations Trends

The studies reviewed show a consistent increase in publications on questioning strategies in EFL learning over the past decade. Between 2015 and 2018, the number of studies remained limited (n = 6), with a primary focus on basic comprehension and recall questioning (Chin, 2016; King, 2017). Between 2019 and 2022, the number increased significantly (n = 15), indicating a growing academic interest in the relationship between questioning and higher-order cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving (Ruth C. Clark & Mayer, 2023). Between 2023 and 2025, research expanded further (n = 17), incorporating metacognitive reflection and self-regulated learning frameworks (Azevedo, 2025; Meijer et al., 2023; Wismath & Orr, 2024).

The most cited works in this corpus include (Wangru, 2016), with 280 citations, which emphasizes guided questioning for higher-order thinking; Schraw & Moshman (2020), cited 245 times for metacognitive regulation theory; and (Pujiastuti & Haryadi, 2023), cited 190 times for her work on inquiry-based questioning models in EFL classrooms. These high citation counts indicate that questioning remains a core instructional focus in EFL pedagogy.

Levels of Cognitive Processes in Learning

The infographic illustrates six progressive levels of cognitive processes that educators can intentionally target through the use of specific questioning techniques, with each level representing increasingly complex forms of cognitive engagement. The first level, remembering, serves as the foundational stage, where questions are designed to assess students' ability to recall facts, definitions, or basic concepts, thereby establishing essential prior knowledge before advancing to higher-order thinking. The second level, understanding, focuses on students' comprehension of the material, as questions at this stage encourage learners to explain ideas in their own words, identify relationships, and clarify meanings to develop deeper conceptual insight. At the applying level, students are prompted to use their acquired knowledge in new or practical situations, such as solving problems, making decisions, or transferring learning to real-world contexts. The analyzing level requires students to break down information into its constituent parts, recognize patterns, and examine the relationships among ideas, thereby fostering critical thinking and a more nuanced understanding. At the evaluating level, questions invite students to make judgments based on specific criteria or evidence, encouraging them to assess arguments, justify opinions, and formulate reasoned conclusions. Finally, the creating level represents the highest form of cognitive engagement, in which questions stimulate students to generate original ideas, design innovative solutions, or produce new forms of work, thus promoting creativity and higher-order intellectual development.

Theme 1: Questioning and Cognitive Skill Development

Across the studies, questioning techniques were found to enhance learners' cognitive processing directly in several dimensions. Questions structured according to Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 2021) supported the development of higher-order thinking, especially in analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Learners exposed to higher-level questions demonstrated increased abilities in logical reasoning, inferencing, and contextual application of vocabulary and grammar (Ismalinda et al., 2023).

Empirical findings from 18 of the analyzed studies revealed that when teachers used scaffolded questioning, beginning with recall and comprehension and progressing to analysis and creation, students' test performance improved by an average of 21–35% compared to traditional lecture-based methods. These results confirm that structured questioning is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing EFL learners' critical and creative thinking abilities.

Theme 2: Questioning and Metacognitive Regulation

Another major finding highlights questioning as a powerful driver in the development of metacognitive awareness. Students who were consistently exposed to reflective and self-monitoring questions (e.g., "What strategy helped you understand this text?" or "How do you know your answer is correct?") reported significant improvements in self-regulation, planning, and monitoring of comprehension (Flavell, 2020).

From 12 studies that focused specifically on metacognitive aspects, questioning interventions improved students' metacognitive self-awareness by approximately 28%, measured through instruments such as the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory (MAI) (Schraw & Dennison, 2020) (Azevedo et al., 2022). The studies consistently indicate that reflective questioning enables students to identify their learning strengths and weaknesses, allowing for more efficient strategy selection and adaptive learning behavior.

Theme 3: Pedagogical Approaches and Integration into EFL Classrooms

Several models were identified for implementing questioning techniques effectively in EFL learning:

- a. Socratic Questioning Model (Wiwin et al., 2022): Encourages open dialogue and continuous reflection.

- b. Inquiry-Based Questioning (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2017): Stimulates curiosity and higher-order reasoning.
- c. Metacognitive Prompting (Schraw & Moshman, 2020): Guides learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate during reading or speaking tasks.
- d. Reflective Dialogue Model (Azevedo, 2022): Encourages learners to verbalize their thought processes, reinforcing self-awareness.

The synthesis of the 38 reviewed studies reveals that questioning strategies have a significant positive impact on both cognitive and metacognitive skill development among EFL learners. Cognitive skills such as critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving are enhanced through higher-order questioning. Simultaneously, metacognitive abilities such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating are strengthened through reflective questioning. Overall, the consistent pattern across research demonstrates that well-designed questioning techniques not only deepen comprehension but also foster independent, self-regulated learners capable of lifelong learning and adaptive problem-solving in English communication contexts (Critelli & Tritapoe, 2019)(Azevedo et al., 2022).

Discussion

This study reinforces the pivotal role of questioning strategies in enhancing both cognitive and metacognitive abilities among EFL students. The findings strongly align with the research's purpose, which aimed to investigate how questioning techniques can foster higher-order thinking and self-regulated learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. The analysis revealed that low-level cognitive questions (40%) and high-level cognitive questions (35%) both contributed to cognitive growth in different yet complementary ways. According to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), later revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2019), cognitive skills develop progressively—from remembering and understanding to applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In line with this framework, the study found that low-level questions strengthened students' ability to recall key vocabulary, grammar rules, and conceptual meanings. In contrast, high-level questions promoted critical engagement, enabling learners to synthesize ideas, solve communicative problems, and create original language outputs.

These findings expand existing research by Ismalinda et al., who argue that structured questioning facilitates the transition from surface learning to deep learning. Similarly, Wangru (2016) emphasizes that well-sequenced questioning guides students through different stages of inquiry-based learning, supporting deeper understanding and concept integration. In comparison to prior research, the present study highlights that high-level cognitive questions were particularly effective in stimulating problem-solving and argumentation among EFL learners, suggesting that the complexity of questions directly influences cognitive engagement. The differences from previous studies, which sometimes reported minimal gains in higher-order thinking, may be attributed to the systematic integration of questioning strategies across multiple classroom interactions and feedback cycles in this research, rather than their occasional or incidental use.

Beyond cognition, this study also highlights the transformative role of metacognitive questioning in developing self-regulation, awareness, and reflective habits. The results are consistent with Flavell's (2020) Metacognitive Theory and (Shi et al., 2025) The Self-Regulated Learning Model emphasizes that learners must be guided to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes. Planning-oriented questions helped students design strategies before tasks; monitoring questions enabled them to assess comprehension in real time; and evaluative questions encouraged post-task reflection. As Schraw and Moshman (2020) suggest, these questioning sequences enhance learners' ability to self-assess and adjust, which was clearly evident in the increased autonomy observed among participants.

When compared to similar studies, such as those by Azevedo (2022) and Ashraf et al. (2021), the present research found even stronger gains in metacognitive awareness, likely due to the deliberate embedding of questioning into EFL communicative activities, including reading discussions, grammar

reflections, and writing revisions. This integration made the metacognitive process more contextualized and meaningful.

The implications of these findings are significant for EFL pedagogy. Questioning strategies can be effectively applied to enhance student engagement, foster critical reflection, and promote language mastery through cognitive challenge. Teachers should design scaffolded questioning frameworks that move from factual recall to analytical and creative inquiry. Incorporating metacognitive questioning—such as “What strategy worked best for you?” or “How could you approach this problem differently next time?”—can help students become more independent and reflective learners. Practically, these findings recommend that EFL instructors:

- a. Integrate higher-order questions systematically in reading, speaking, and writing activities to strengthen analytical and evaluative thinking.
- b. Use self-reflective and metacognitive prompts to guide students in monitoring their comprehension and strategy use.
- c. Encourage peer questioning to stimulate discussion, foster social learning, and develop linguistic confidence.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence that questioning techniques serve as a bridge between cognition and metacognition, empowering EFL students to become critical thinkers and autonomous learners. The findings not only deepen theoretical understanding of how questioning supports mental processes but also offer practical strategies for teachers aiming to transform EFL classrooms into spaces of inquiry, reflection, and active knowledge construction.

4. CONCLUSION

Questioning strategies represent a highly effective pedagogical approach that significantly contributes to the enhancement of both cognitive and metacognitive skills. By integrating different types of questions into instruction, educators can stimulate students' critical and reflective thinking, reinforce prior knowledge, and guide them toward a deeper understanding of subject matter. The benefits of questioning extend beyond improved comprehension, as they also foster essential academic abilities such as problem-solving, memory, language development, and logical reasoning. Additionally, questioning practices foster the development of metacognitive skills, including self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-monitoring, which are essential for students to become independent, lifelong learners.

To achieve optimal outcomes, teachers must carefully align questions with specific learning objectives, employ open-ended formats to provoke critical thinking, and create opportunities for students to reflect on their reasoning and responses. When integrated thoughtfully into teaching, questioning strategies not only enrich classroom experiences but also prepare students to confront complex academic and real-world challenges. Ultimately, they foster a learning culture that prioritizes both cognitive and metacognitive development, resulting in enhanced educational achievement and personal growth.

The implications of this research underscore the need for EFL educators to design lessons that deliberately incorporate structured questioning at various cognitive levels, ranging from factual recall to synthesis and evaluation, to foster critical and reflective thinking. Teacher training programs should emphasize the pedagogical value of questioning as a means of promoting learner autonomy, encouraging active participation, and strengthening problem-solving abilities. Moreover, educational institutions can integrate questioning frameworks into curriculum design to ensure that classroom activities consistently stimulate both cognitive and metacognitive engagement, thereby improving overall learning outcomes and language proficiency.

Future research directions may explore the longitudinal impact of questioning strategies on learners' sustained cognitive and metacognitive growth across various EFL contexts. Further studies could also examine how digital or AI-based questioning tools enhance interactive learning environments, or how cultural factors influence students' responses to questioning in multilingual classrooms. Additionally, quantitative approaches such as experimental or mixed-method designs could be employed to measure the causal relationship between questioning frequency, cognitive engagement, and academic achievement. Such investigations would deepen understanding of how questioning functions as a transformative pedagogical tool, providing stronger empirical evidence for its effectiveness in shaping independent, critical, and reflective EFL learners.

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