A Research on Different Classroom Questioning Strategies Between Chinese and Foreign EFL Teachers

Runhong Liu*

Experimental School Affiliated to Haidian Teachers Training College, Beijing 100097, China

***Corresponding author:** Runhong Liu, liurunhong6666@163.com

Abstract: The application of questioning as a teaching tool has always been considered as a main part of the teaching process. Based on the viewpoint of several researchers, a survey was conducted on the application of different questioning strategies by Chinese and foreign EFL teachers in a middle school, in order to determine their effects on students' language learning output and propose measures to optimize Chinese teachers' questioning strategies for improving students' learning efficiency. This research provides preliminary results based on the data collected from the video recordings of class sessions, a questionnaire, and an interview. According to the analysis, the questioning strategies differ between Chinese and foreign EFL teachers in many aspects, such as in information seeking, offering, modification, adjustment, feedback, and so forth.

Keywords: Classroom questioning strategies; Chinese and foreign EFL teachers; Comparative analysis; Optimizing measures

1. Introduction

Vygotsky states that learning does not occur in isolation but through interaction and dialogue with another person. In the context of a classroom when a student is questioned by another who is more knowledgeable or capable, the student is better able to achieve the task [1]. Questioning in EFL classrooms has various kinds of functions, such as disciplinary, clarification, rhetorical, and questions related to language learning itself. However, the main purpose of questioning in EFL classroom is to promote students' language competence and develop their critical thinking skills. All these refer to questioning strategies. Certain strategies are involved in the questioning process. The use of questioning in EFL classrooms offers wonderful opportunities. During the questioning, students are asked to express opinions and guided into giving supporting reasons and justifications for their opinions [2]. The selection of questioning strategies is totally up to individual teachers. Teachers' personal taste, educational beliefs, and cultural background may influence their choice of strategies.

Researchers and linguists at home and abroad have provided sound scientific information on classroom language interaction. However, Long and Sato found that most educators ask a substantially higher proportion of display questions or queries for which they already know the answers to [3]. Paul and Elder state that thinking is primarily driven by questions; hence, the right questions will produce correct thinking. Low order questioning should be followed by higher order questioning to lead students into idea elaboration, claim justification, opinion illustration, and the likes [4]. Classroom discourse, specifically teachers' feedback and response to students' answers, also has an influence on students' cognitive process [5]. In other

words, the follow-up question or feedback based on the initial response is crucial since it can serve as a scaffolding for students' thinking.

However, these foreign linguistic studies focused on either first language classrooms or second language classrooms; they pay little attention to middle school English classrooms in China [6]. Chinese middle school teachers tend to complain that students are passive, and the interaction in English classes is narrow despite teachers' questioning. Chinese teachers spend most of their time asking low-level display questions. The simplest form of questioning is used as a means for checking understanding and for recalling what has been taught; it does not involve active learning or participation. Foreign teachers' questioning strategies can be used effectively in scaffolding students' learning; they are capable of helping students think through the responses elicited by asking appropriate questions. One of the most important aspects of EFL classrooms is the interaction between teachers and students since it not only produces language but also affects student engagement and achievement. Hence, the research on teachers' questioning is important in view of students' poor performances in English classes in middle schools. Based on what has been found, this research, developed as supplementary research, aims at the different questioning strategies applied by Chinese and foreign EFL teachers who teach English in the same classes in a middle school. Therefore, this research will stimulate some reflections on Chinese teachers' questioning strategies in EFL classrooms in China to a certain extent by comparing the strategies used by teachers with different cultural backgrounds, in order to improve Chinese teachers' questioning strategies.

2. Research design
2.1. Problem statement
In exploring the different questioning strategies applied by Chinese and foreign ELF teachers, the objectives of the research are therefore to answer the following questions:
(1) What are the different types of questioning strategies applied by Chinese and foreign EFL teachers?
(2) What determines the teachers' rationale for employing questions related to learners' gradual progress in the target language, and what regularities can be observed?
(3) What improvements should be made in Chinese teachers' EFL classroom?

2.2. Setting and participants
Four Chinese teachers (T1, T2, T3, and T4) and two foreign teachers (F1 and F2) who teach the same grades were included in the study. The average age of the Chinese teachers was 28; all of them had a master's degree, and their average working experience was five years. F1 and F2 were Yale graduates; both had two years of working experience and were 24 years old; both were qualified to teach. Four classes from Junior I and Junior II were randomly selected for the study. Both the Chinese teachers and foreign teachers taught English in these four classes. The investigation began in September 2021 and ended in January 2022. A total of 105 Junior I students and 113 Junior II students participated in the research. The video recordings were made of two lessons in each class of each grade. There were 10 valid recordings out of 16 in total. A questionnaire survey on the degree of students' favor towards their teachers was conducted on students from both grades. There were 205 valid questionnaires out of 218.

2.3. Instrument
This was a mixed method research, and it was conducted on a small scale, using three instruments for measurements, which would help validate the results. The data were derived from student questionnaires, semi-structured interviews of teachers and students, as well as video recordings of the EFL classroom sessions. The interview questions extracted each teacher's rationale and views of their questioning

strategies, the factors that have influenced their decisions on the questions used, and their experiences with students' answers to their questions. For students, some of the interview questions are listed as follows:

(1) Whose classroom teaching is more interesting, that of the Chinese teachers or foreign teachers, and why?

(2) Who talks more in class, the teacher, or the students?

Transcripts of the videotaped sessions observing and measuring the teachers' behaviors in questioning, such as uttering, wording, modifying, and feedback, as well as students' responses to teachers' questions were analyzed to determine the applications of different questioning strategies by Chinese and foreign EFL teachers. All the students were asked to fill out a survey questionnaire designed to gather students' feedback on the teachers' performances, such as their questioning formats, methods, skills, language, and so forth. The analysis of the feedback was for determining the effective questioning strategies.

2.4. Data analysis

Sixteen lessons were recorded, in which the videos were then transcribed for analysis and measurement. All questioning strategies, including the pace, frequency, types, patterns, allocation, modification, and feedback, were measured based on classroom observation and video transcriptions. Several statistical tables were formed. Second, questionnaires were distributed to investigate how students perceive the different teaching styles by the Chinese and foreign teachers, respectively. The findings were demonstrated in a statistical figure. Third, an interview was conducted to gauge students' and teachers' real thoughts on questioning strategies, in which some details were noted down.

3. Findings and discussion
3.1. General comparison
3.1.1. Language used in questioning

Both, Chinese teachers and foreign teachers share similar characteristics (**Table 1**) in their utterance and wording while they raise questions. The similarities were more obvious in lower-grade students' classrooms.

Table 1. Language used in questioning

Items	Similar characteristics
Phonology	Slow speaking speed, less vowel abbreviation, fewer contractions, standard literary pronunciation, somewhat exaggerated articulation, more pauses, and fewer consonant cluster reductions.
Lexicology	More basic, less slang, fewer colloquial expressions, more concrete and proper nouns, fewer indefinite pronouns, and less variety of content and function words.
Syntax	More complete and better-formed sentences, fewer words per sentence, fewer subordinate and conditional clauses, fewer past-tense verbs, less diversity in case roles, fewer passive voices, fewer clauses per communication unit, and more statements than imperatives.

3.1.2. Students' responses to questions

Table 2 shows students' responses to questions. The Chinese teachers' and foreign teachers' questioning strategies have different effects on Junior I and Junior II students. The Junior I students taught by Chinese teachers responded more quickly and were more active in class. However, these active students were those with high language proficiency. Therefore, the scope of interaction was relatively narrowed. Unlike the classes conducted by Chinese teachers, those conducted by foreign teachers for Junior II students had an active environment, in which the scope of interaction was quite wide.

Table 2. Students' responses to questions

Student level	Chinese teachers	Foreign teachers
Junior I	Some students responded quickly to the questions. A large number of questions were raised by the teachers. The classes were in good order.	Students had a slower response rate, and there were more errors in their answers. Students encountered difficulties in communicating with the teachers. Students also had less language output, and fewer questions were asked by the teachers. The classes were not in order at times.
Junior II	Fewer students answered the questions. There were less interactions between the students and teachers. The classes were not very active.	Many students answered the questions and were able to express themselves well. There were more interactions between the students and teachers. The classes had more language output.

3.1.3. Students' perception on questioning strategies

Students' perceptions of how questioning strategies are used in classrooms indicate whether or not teachers are using the appropriate questioning strategies.

Figure 1 clearly shows that foreign teachers are favored by both groups of students. This is mainly because they prefer the relaxing, vivid, and humorous questioning strategies used by foreign teachers. Junior II students prefer foreign teachers more than the Junior I students do, because these students have already mastered some basic communication skills in English, thereby having more opportunities for interaction.
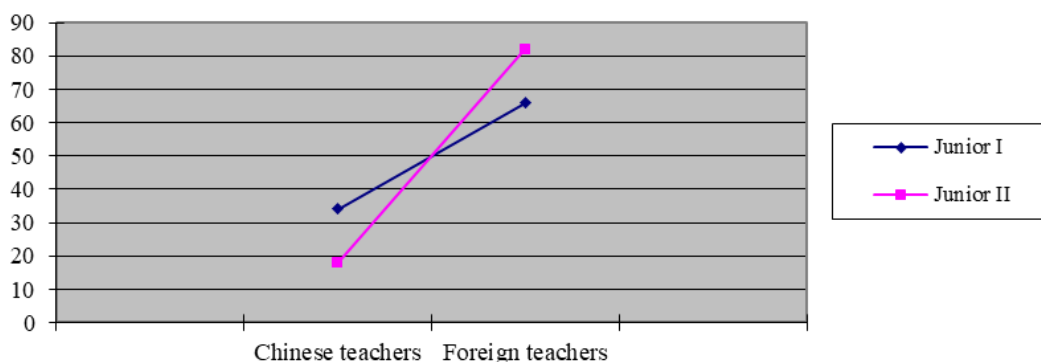

Figure 1. Degree of favor towards teachers' questioning strategies

3.2. Comparative research

3.2.1. Information allocation strategy

Figure 2 shows that Chinese teachers spend more time on talking and questioning than that of foreign teachers. As the students' English level improves, the percentage of time spent on talking increases, while the percentage of time spent on questioning decreases. In foreign teachers' classroom, as the students' English level improves, the percentage of time spent on talking and questioning decreases. From the data, it can be concluded that there are strategic differences in the use of time spent on talking and questioning between Chinese teachers and foreign teachers as shown in **Table 3**.
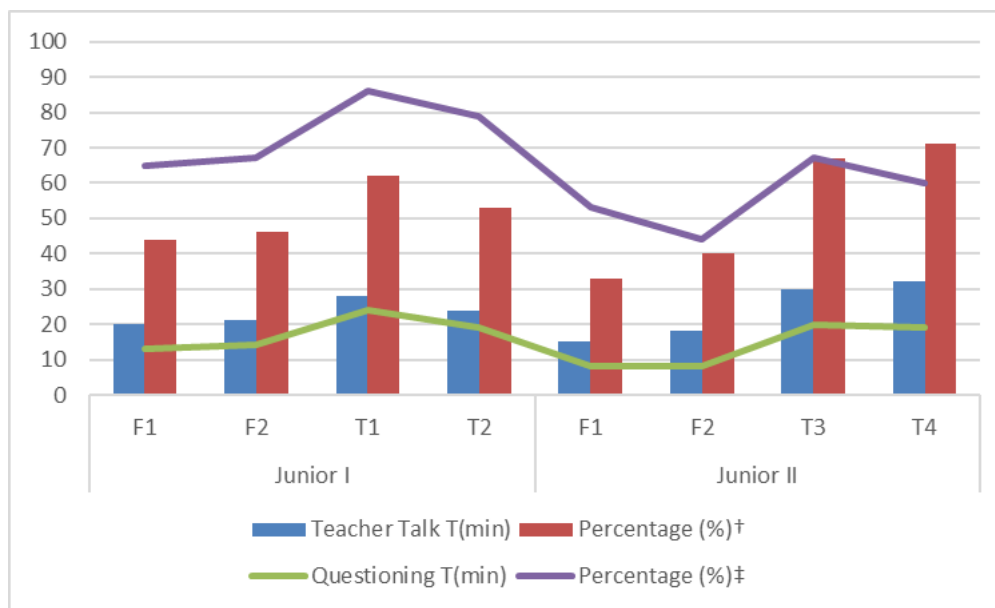
Figure 2. Proportion of time spent on questioning (Note: Each lesson lasts for 40 minutes. † represents the percentage of time spent talking by the teacher in one lesson; ‡ represents the percentage of time spent questioning by the teacher in one lesson)

Table 3. Strategic differences in the use of time spent on talking and questioning

Foreign teachers	Chinese teachers
Teachers often focus on activities or tasks.	Teachers often focus on students' understanding and accuracy of both the meaning and form.
Teachers do not use fixed textbooks.	Teachers use textbooks as the main teaching material.
Students are able to express themselves more freely through classroom activities, such as discussion, role-playing, song-word filling, and so forth; the class environment is also more active.	The class environment is often tense in view of the fast pace in teaching and the continuous questioning and talking by teachers.
There are more interactions between students and teachers as well as among students themselves.	The lessons are generally teacher-centered, and the teaching goal is mainly to explain words, sentences, and grammar.

3.2.2. Information seeking strategy
3.2.2.1. Selection of question types

The strategy of selecting question types has a direct impact on teachers' information seeking and students' language output.

Long and Sato classified the types of questions in EFL classrooms into echo (comprehension checks, clarification requests, and confirmation checks) and epistemic questions (referential, display, expressive, and rhetorical questions) [3]. The research revealed that most of the questions were epistemic. Moreover, the most used questions were display questions, while the most used questions under the category of echo questions were confirmation checks. Long and Sato regard display questions as knowledge-checking questions, while those to which the teacher does not know the answer to are classified as referential questions, in which they require thinking, interpretation, and analysis on the part of the individual answering the questions. The idea of questioning generally assisting students' learning seems to be supported by a study that discovered that random questioning during lectures and discussions not only promotes consistent preparation and active involvement, but also results in higher levels of success among students compared to the controlled subjects. Several researchers investigated the role of questions in ESL classrooms and

found that referential questions have the capability to encourage learners' oral production. The level of questioning should be raised systematically, and teachers have to plan accordingly to ensure the appropriate use of questions. The important point is to move beyond recall or recitation of learning [7]

Table 4 shows that there is a strategic difference in the selection of question types between Chinese teachers and foreign teachers. The number of display questions that Chinese teachers raised in their classes is larger than that of foreign teachers. The high percentage of the use of display questions separates the situation in the classroom from that outside the classroom, where display questions are virtually never used, for to begin asking display questions in social situations outside the classroom could lead to highly undesirable consequences [8]. The main reason for that disparity is that Chinese teachers emphasize too much on checking students' knowledge. In most cases, the teachers already have the answers for those questions. On the contrary, foreign teachers focus on encouraging students to answer questions in a creative way.

**Table 4.** Rates of display questions and referential questions

Student level	Teachers	Number of questions, n	Display questions		Referential question	
			n	%	n	%
Junior I	F1	21	15	71	6	29
	F2	14	11	79	3	21
	T1	31	29	94	2	6
	T2	35	34	97	1	3
Junior II	F1	29	16	55	13	45
	F2	20	10	50	10	50
	T1	42	37	88	5	12
	T2	36	29	81	7	19

However, not all types of display questions should be viewed as of low quality. Many subject areas, in fact, require students to remember and grasp basic knowledge, such as new words and grammar rules, before negotiating more abstract and complicated topics.

3.2.2.2. Answer-seeking types

Both, Chinese teachers and foreign teachers use four strategies to seek answers: nominating; chorus-answering; volunteering; self-answering [9].

Figure 3 indicates that Chinese teachers are more likely than foreign teachers to employ nominating and self-answering strategies. Junior I students were more engaged than Junior II students and showed a higher percentage of voluntary responses. However, upon closer inspection, it is discovered that these voluntary responses come from only a handful of the top students. The rest of the students did not actively engage in answering questions, especially those with low language proficiency. In addition, Chinese teachers tend to answer their own questions more often than foreign teachers. The reason is that they want to save time for more detailed explanation of language points. As a result, the meaning of questioning itself is redundant, and at the same time, students may become more dependent on their teachers [9]. Foreign teachers tend to use less nominating and self-answering strategies. When students encounter problems in understanding or expressing, the teachers are more likely to modify their questions and make them easier for students to understand. The class environment is relaxing, and class takes a slower pace, which can be clearly seen in Junior II classroom.
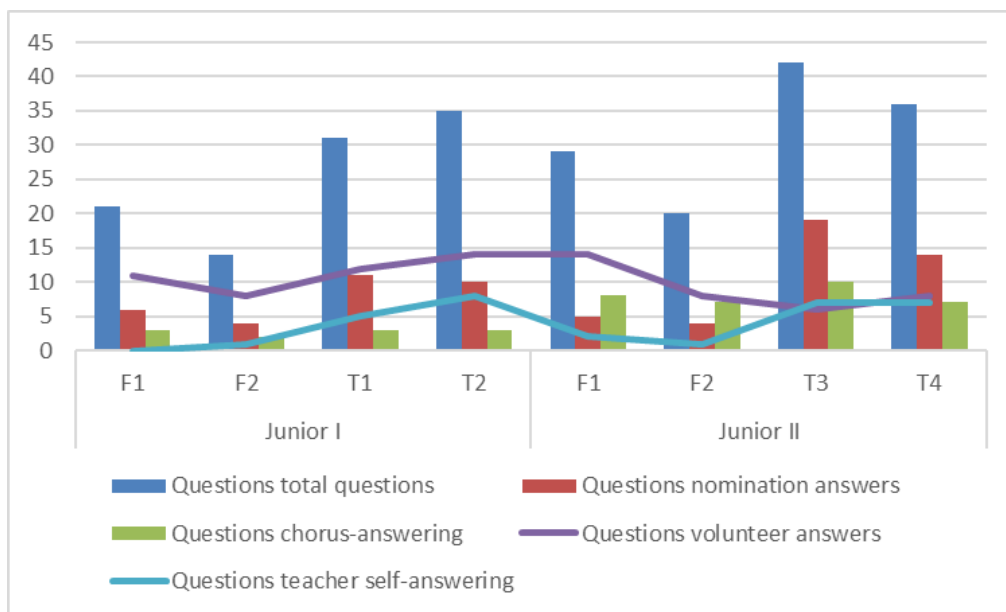
Figure 3. Answer-seeking types

3.2.3. Information offering strategy

It is found that there is a similarity in selecting the offering information strategy. Both, Chinese teachers and foreign teachers would generally offer some clues in questioning to enhance students' understanding. They often use questioning patterns, including "Yes" or "No" choices, fill-in-the-blanks, and translating English into Chinese or vice versa. Foreign teachers will ask the students to translate only if they have issues understanding. Although the strategy applied by both, Chinese teachers and foreign teachers are the same, Chinese teachers use more fill-in-the-blank questions than foreign teachers. **Table 5** shows that foreign teachers' fill-in-the-blank questions take up 7% to 14% of their total questions, while those of the Chinese teachers take up 17% to 42% of their total questions.

**Table 5.** Rate of fill-in-the-blank questions

Student level	Teachers	Total questions, n	Fill-in-the-blank questions	
			n	%
Junior I	F1	21	3	14
	F2	14	1	7
	T1	31	13	42
	T2	35	8	23
Junior II	F1	29	2	7
	F2	20	0	0
	T1	42	9	21
	T2	36	6	17

3.2.4. Information modification strategy

Modification is a common strategy applied by teachers in questioning. The purpose of modification is to ensure the questions are better understood by students. Modification can be in the form of repetition, paraphrasing, using alternative questions, and wait time. It is found that both, Chinese teachers and the foreign teachers use this strategy.

3.2.4.1. Self-repetition

Figure 4 shows the self-repetition rate of both, Chinese teachers and foreign teachers. In the Chinese teachers' lessons, it is found that the rate of self-repetition (including using different words) is high, but the rate of correct response to these repeated questions is not as high as expected. Students may have found it challenging to identify the correct answers due to the repetition or change of words in the questions. This phenomenon is more common among higher grade students. In the foreign teachers' lessons, things are quite different. Foreign teachers use less repetition compared to Chinese teachers. Students' response rate in Junior II classes is much higher than that in Junior I classes. The reason may be that lower grade students lack basic English skills and therefore have difficulty in understanding and following the lesson.
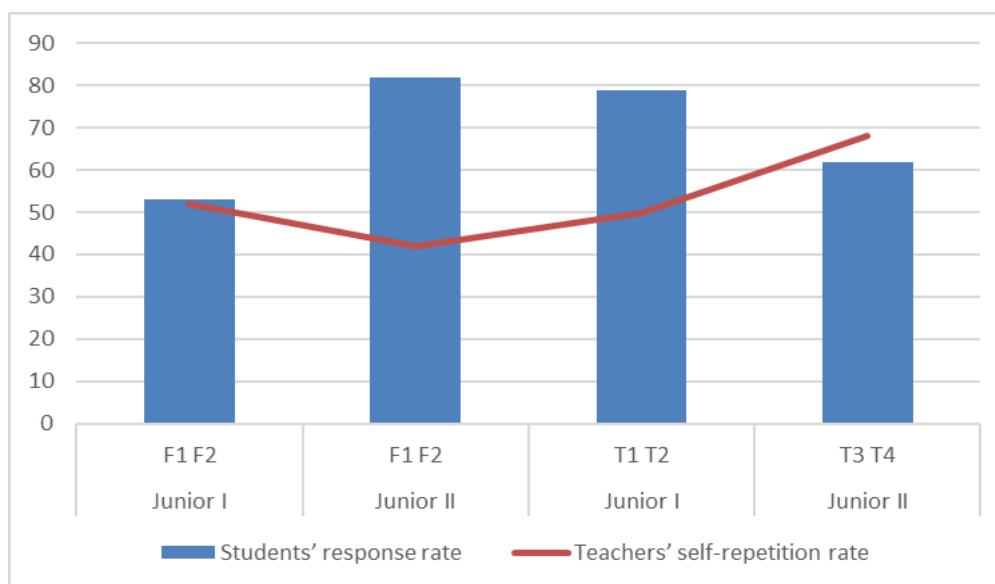
Figure 4. Rate of self-repetition

3.2.4.2. Paraphrasing

If the questions are incomprehensible to students, teachers may consciously or unconsciously provide a clue (paraphrasing) for them to find the answers. **Table 6** shows the rate of paraphrasing. Obviously, foreign teachers use paraphrasing less often than their Chinese counterparts. However, teachers should be more cautious when using this kind of modification since it can put a limit to the scope of answers and even suppress students' creative thinking.

Table 6. Rate of paraphrasing

Student level	Teachers	Students' response rate	Paraphrasing rate
Junior I	F1 F2	53	15
Junior II	F1 F2	82	8
Junior I	T1 T2	79	27
Junior II	T3 T4	62	22

3.2.4.3. Using alternative questions

Another type of modification is changing the questions into alternative questions, which would reduce the difficulty of questions. This modification is a popular strategy that both, Chinese teachers and foreign teachers use in classrooms. However, comparatively, Chinese teachers use it more often than foreign teachers. Indeed, this strategy helps students arrive at the answers to difficult questions and helps teachers

to control the class performance. However, if the questions are not very challenging, this modification would not be effective.

3.2.4.4. Wait time

Wait time is the amount of time between the pause after a question and before pursuing the answer to further questions or nominating a student to answer [10]. It is important for students to have sufficient time to think about the questions raised before attempting to answer them [8]. This study found that the average wait time of Junior I and Junior II students in the Chinese teachers' lessons are much shorter than that in the foreign teachers' lessons. The reason may be that Chinese teachers tend to overemphasize the accuracy and fluency of students' answers, while foreign teachers tend to focus on students' opinions, ideas, and feelings. Wait time leaves students a better opportunity to construct their responses, and it may fit better with their cultural norms of interaction [10].

3.2.5. Information adjustment strategy

Questioning has a specific function of maintaining interaction by ensuring that the interlocutors share the same interlocution and identification of referents [10]. Tsui listed six devices in the use of this strategy [11]: comprehension check, confirmation check, clarification request, repetition request, decomposition, and self-repetition. Three of the six modification devices, including comprehension check, self-repetition, and decomposition, are devices that teachers use to make their input comprehensible. In fact, if these strategies are used students, students are in fact engaging in negotiation of meaning of comprehensible input.

This study found that the amount of negotiation of meaning in interaction that students and teachers are engaged in is larger in foreign teachers' lessons than that in Chinese teachers' lessons, thus indicating that Chinese teachers' classrooms are more teacher-centered.

3.2.6. Information feedback strategy

In almost every language classroom, information exchange follows the same pattern: teachers elicit or start – students respond – teachers evaluate or provide feedback. Feedbacks from teachers provide information on whether the answers are correct or not [10]. Feedback can be divided into two types: positive feedback and negative feedback. Positive feedback can be a positive comment, an encouraging statement, or a repetition of the correct answer and making comments on it. Positive feedback has two principal functions: to let students know that they have performed well, and to motivate them through praise [8]. Negative feedback is a process of acknowledging errors in answers and correcting them right away. Ignoring students' answers or even criticizing them is considered a negative feedback. **Figure 5** shows that Chinese teachers use more negative feedback and less positive feedback than foreign teachers.
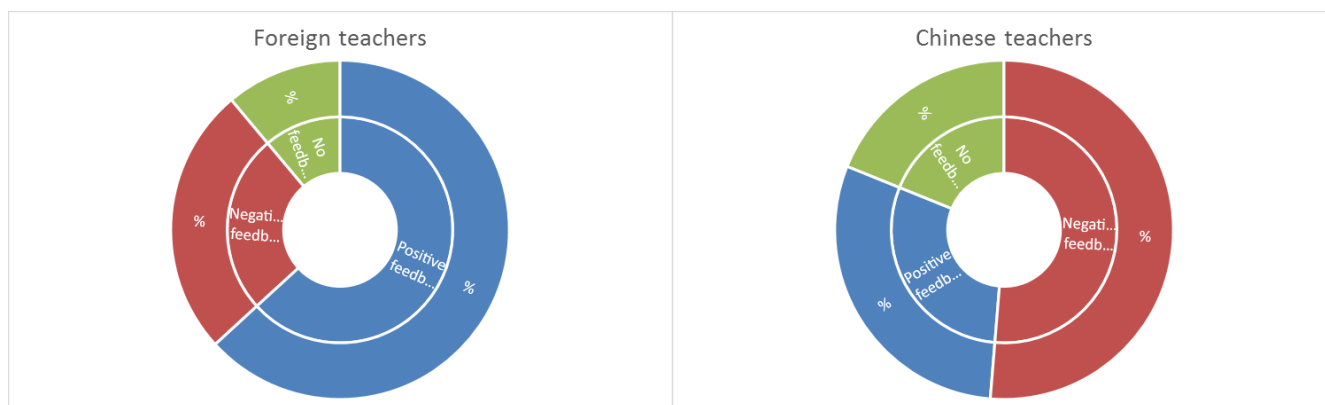

Figure 5. Teachers' feedback on students' answers

The reason why Chinese teachers use more negative feedback is that they tend to overemphasize the accuracy and standard of students' answers. On the other hand, foreign teachers tend to focus on students' engagement in communication and negotiation. Therefore, they use less negative feedback.

Research has shown that it is better for teachers to leave errors alone among lower-level students as they are unable to obtain any benefit from the correction. The most important thing is to encourage shy and quiet students to express themselves openly.

4. Conclusion and recommendations
4.1. Conclusion
By comparing the use of different questioning strategies between Chinese and foreign EFL teachers, several conclusions can be obtained.

4.1.1. Questioning strategies used by Chinese teachers
(1) The majority of questions used by Chinese teachers are comprehension check and confirmation.
(2) In questioning, teachers feel that they have to constantly ensure that students can follow and understand what is being taught because of their low proficiency.
(3) Most questions asked by Chinese teachers mainly focus on the content and students' knowledge. The responses elicit specific, predetermined answers and require very little thinking or analysis.
(4) The teachers are aware of the significance of referential questions, but they fail to perceive its importance in relation to oral production and language acquisition.
(5) Chinese teachers have a higher percentage of self-repetition and a shorter wait time.
(6) Chinese teachers also use more negative feedback; they are more likely to correct errors in students' answers and emphasize form and accuracy over meaning and communication.

4.1.2. Questioning strategies used by foreign teachers
(1) Teachers design and prepare questions beforehand to encourage students to participate by interacting and guide students to communicate effectively.
(2) Teachers use different types of referential questions to elicit different types of responses, so as to increase oral production.
(3) Foreign teachers create a comfortable and relaxing environment in classrooms; therefore, majority of the students are willing to respond.
(4) Foreign teachers make better use of proper questioning strategies that encourage students to actively take part in the negotiation of comprehensible input.
(5) Foreign teachers use more positive feedback to encourage students to express their ideas and thoughts freely.

All the aforementioned differences result from different conceptions of education as well as cultural backgrounds and systems of evaluating students' performance between Chinese and foreign EFL teachers.

4.2. Recommendations
Based on the results, several recommendations are made in order to improve Chinese teachers' questioning strategies in addition to learning from foreign teachers.

4.2.1. Asking questions that encourage visible thinking
Rather than a set of fixed lessons, visible thinking is an extensive and adaptable collection of practices that include thinking routines and documentation of students' thinking. The routines include a small set of questions or a short sequence of steps that can be used across various grades and contents. Thinking routines

help direct students' thinking and structure classroom discussions. Thinking becomes visible as different viewpoints are expressed, documented, discussed, and reflected on [12]. Ron also listed eight devices to apply this strategy.

(1) Observing closely and describing what is there

(2) Building explanations and interpretations

(3) Reasoning with evidence

(4) Making connections

(5) Considering different viewpoints and perspectives

(6) Capturing the heart and forming conclusions

(7) Wondering and asking questions

(8) Uncovering complexity and going below the surface of things

Besides, EFL teachers are also encouraged to ask authentic questions, constructive questions, and questions that can stimulate students' thinking.

4.2.2. Increasing the chances of practicing the target language

Whether teacher talk is properly used or not will leave an impact on students' language output and their social communication skills [13]. In order to increase the efficiency, teachers should make better use of nonverbal behaviors, such as maintaining eye contact, smiling, nodding, and using gestures that encourage students' responses.

4.2.3. Encouraging students to express their own opinions

Ellis argued that less negotiation of meaning takes place when less proficient learners lack the ability to respond [14]. Teachers should concert efforts to extend the wait time in order to improve students' responses.

4.2.4. Enhancing students' self-improvement skills

Teachers must provide learners with appropriate cognitive feedback and affective support [15]. Helping students enhance their self-improvement skills is also a major part of a teacher's job.

4.2.5. Introducing group work into classroom teaching

Group work is a frequently cited strategy for changing the interactional dynamics of language classrooms [16]. Most importantly, it not only reduces the amount of teacher talk and increases the opportunity for students' output but also provides more autonomy and independency to students in learning and discussions. The survey research was conducted on a small scale, thereby lacking generality. Further research is necessary to investigate the effects of group size and proficiency level as well as to determine to what extent the effects of training lie in teachers' questioning strategies. However, the research has obtained remarkable findings in revealing some differences in the questioning strategies used by Chinese and foreign teachers, thus providing EFL/SLA teachers and language researchers an exploring point to reflect and improve middle school English teaching.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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