

EFL teachers' perceptions of open-ended methods in English instruction: A mixed-methods study in upper secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

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Open-ended instructional methods have been widely introduced to enhance students' higher-order thinking and communicative skills; however, their implementation in English language teaching in Indonesian upper secondary schools remains underexplored, especially from teachers' perspectives. This study aims to examine EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences toward the use of open-ended methods in English instruction. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed, involving 23 EFL teachers from public and private upper secondary schools in Eastern Jakarta, Indonesia. Quantitative data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire and analysed through descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were obtained from teachers' narrative reflections and analysed using thematic analysis to explain the quantitative findings. The results revealed that EFL teachers held positive perceptions of open-ended methods, recognizing their effectiveness in enhancing students' critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills, and learning motivation. However, teachers reported moderate confidence in implementation and highlighted challenges such as students' limited language proficiency and difficulty responding to complex questions. Additionally, a strong need for professional development was identified. The study recommends providing sustained professional development, appropriate scaffolding strategies, and institutional support to optimize learning outcomes and facilitate effective integration of open-ended methods in upper secondary EFL classrooms.

Keywords: EFL teachers; English instruction; open-ended methods; upper secondary schools

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, open-ended instructional methods have gained increasing attention in upper secondary education as part of a broader shift toward student-centred and higher-order thinking-oriented pedagogies (Panda & Behera, 2024). These approaches emphasise independent inquiry, discussion, problem-solving, and multiple possible responses rather than single correct answers, aligning with 21st-century learning frameworks and competency-based curricula (Beldar, 2025). In English language teaching (ELT), open-ended questioning, task-based interaction, and dialogic discussion are recognised as strategies that foster students' communicative competence, engagement, and critical thinking (He, 2025). Previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of open-ended tasks in enhancing students' higher-order thinking, engagement, and interaction; however, several limitations remain. Apoko et al. (2025) found that deep learning approaches improved engagement among Indonesian vocational school students, yet the study focused mainly on students' perspectives, neglecting teachers' roles. Dauletiyarova et al. (2025) reported improved speaking skills through open-ended questioning but did not explore teachers' beliefs or readiness. Similarly, Ibraheem (2025) showed that questioning techniques enhance critical engagement in higher education, though the focus was on discourse rather than teachers' perceptions in school contexts. Meanwhile, Karaman and Büyükkıdık (2023) highlighted teachers' awareness of open-ended questioning but noted challenges in implementation without deeply examining affective factors. These studies have demonstrated that open-ended questioning can stimulate learner engagement and promote deeper language processing through meaningful negotiation of meaning.

Originally, open-ended instructional methods derive from constructivist educational philosophy, particularly influenced by Dewey (1986), who emphasised inquiry, reflection, and student-centred learning as foundations for meaningful education. Open-ended methods are generally defined as instructional approaches that encourage students to generate multiple possible responses, interpretations, or solutions to the problem given, rather than relying on single correct answers, and help to promote students' understanding and reasoning (Munroe, 2015; Smith & Higgins, 2006). Similarly, open-ended questions and tasks are considered problems that contain many correct answers or several ways to the correct answers, allowing students to learn and use their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Yugandhar, 2012). These methods emphasise higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, evaluation, creativity, and problem-solving. In secondary school contexts, open-ended instruction is implemented through strategies such as inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, collaborative discussions, and open-ended questioning.

Historically, open-ended methods gained prominence in secondary education from different countries and subject areas during global curriculum reforms emphasising 21st-century skills and outcomes-based learning. For example, a mixed-methods study conducted in a secondary school in Thailand found that open-ended questions and activities improved students' analytical thinking skills among students of all achievement levels (Monrat et al., 2022). Moreover, in Kazakhstan secondary schools, a mixed-methods study using classroom observations, qualitative feedback from

students, and tests reported that open-ended tasks promoted students' engagement and confidence (Dauletiyarova et al., 2025). In Finland, the video-recorded discussions through content analysis demonstrated that open-ended inquiry tasks improved students' reasoning and conceptual understanding in primary and secondary science classrooms (Hiltunen et al., 2021). These findings highlight the theoretical and pedagogical importance of open-ended methods in fostering meaningful and cognitively engaging learning experiences.

In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), open-ended methods have become increasingly important as communicative and learner-centred approaches have gained prominence. Open-ended instructional strategies align closely with communicative language teaching (CLT) and sociocultural theory, emphasising meaningful interaction, learner agency, and authentic language use (Basher et al., 2025). In secondary school EFL contexts, open-ended questioning and discussion have been widely used to enhance productive English skills, critical thinking, and learner engagement. For example, a qualitative study based on classroom observations conducted in Norway found that open-ended questioning encouraged students to use more open-ended questions in writing activities than in grammar instruction (Svanes & Andersson-Bakken, 2023). Similarly, in an Indonesian secondary school, a descriptive qualitative approach using classroom observations and video recordings revealed that open-ended questions increased students' higher-order thinking skills and willingness to communicate in English in the classroom (Rahmaeni, 2025). Additionally, a survey study conducted in Turkish secondary schools found that teachers were aware of the importance of open-ended instructional approaches in language proficiency, although they expressed concerns about time constraints and evaluation demands (Özen & Mert, 2024). Research in higher education EFL contexts has also demonstrated the effectiveness of open-ended instructional approaches. For example, a qualitative study conducted in a Chinese university employing classroom observations and teacher-student interactions found that open-ended questions significantly fostered richer, more complex language use and deeper cognitive engagement despite the limitation of students' response depth (He, 2025). These findings indicate that open-ended methods are effective in promoting critical thinking, learning engagement, communicative and cognitive development in EFL secondary and higher education.

However, much of the existing research has focused on students' performance outcomes or experimental classroom interventions, while limited studies have focused on EFL teachers' perceptions and emotional readiness to implement open-ended methods, particularly in Indonesian upper secondary school contexts. This gap is significant given that teachers' perceptions and experiences strongly influence pedagogical decision-making and instructional practice. In line with this, teachers' perceptions and experiences play a crucial role in the adoption of innovative approaches such as open-ended methods. Conceptually, perceptions refer to teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and judgments about the value and effectiveness of a given pedagogy (McDonald, 2012), while experiences reflect any feelings on practical engagement and challenges encountered during implementation (Clough, 1973). These cognitive and affective dimensions shape how teachers interpret curriculum goals, select teaching strategies, and respond to students' learning needs in the classroom. In the context of ELT, teachers who possess positive perceptions toward

student-centred learning are more likely to encourage discussion, inquiry, and collaborative learning activities that promote higher-order thinking skills (Hemmati & Malayeri, 2022; Puspitasari, 2025). Conversely, negative experiences, limited pedagogical knowledge, and institutional constraints may reduce teachers' confidence and willingness to adopt innovative instructional approaches (Haddaoui, 2025). Furthermore, research in EFL contexts has demonstrated that teachers' prior experiences influence their readiness to implement communicative and inquiry-based methods, particularly in classrooms requiring active student participation and critical engagement (Jiang, 2021). Therefore, understanding teachers' perceptions and experiences of open-ended methods is essential for identifying both the opportunities and the practical challenges associated with implementing them in upper secondary English language classrooms.

Responding to this gap, the current study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the use of open-ended methods in English instruction in Indonesian upper secondary schools through a mixed-methods study. Investigating this study is important as teachers' beliefs and emotions play a central role in shaping classroom implementation and instructional innovation. Prior research underscores that educational reforms and learner-centred methodologies can only be successfully adopted when teachers perceive them as meaningful, feasible, and aligned with contextual demands (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Mutuna & Iloanya, 2025; Sakata et al., 2022). In addition, teachers' perceptions influence their willingness to experiment with innovative pedagogies, while their teaching experiences determine how effectively such approaches are adapted to students' needs and classroom realities. In EFL contexts, where communicative interaction, critical thinking, and active participation are highly emphasised, teachers' positive perceptions and experiences are particularly essential for fostering meaningful learning environments. Previous studies have shown that supportive teacher beliefs contribute to greater instructional flexibility, student engagement, and the successful implementation of student-centred learning approaches (Chaaban, 2017; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). Therefore, understanding teachers' perspectives provides essential insights for curriculum development, teacher training, and policy improvement in upper secondary EFL settings where practical communication skills and higher-order thinking are increasingly prioritised. Based on these considerations, the research questions are formulated below:

- (1) How do English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers perceive open-ended methods in English language learning?
- (2) How do EFL teachers experience open-ended methods in teaching English to upper secondary school students in Indonesia?

Following these research questions, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on innovative pedagogical practices in EFL education by providing empirical evidence from the underexplored context of Indonesian upper secondary schools. By examining both teachers' perceptions and experiences, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how open-ended methods are viewed and implemented in real classroom settings. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discussions on teacher cognition and student-centred learning while providing practical implications for teacher professional development, curriculum design, and educational policy. In addition, the study may help EFL teachers and

policymakers promote teaching approaches that promote students' critical thinking, creativity, and active participation in English learning.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, in which quantitative data were collected and analysed in the first phase, followed by qualitative data to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This design was selected as it allowed researchers to obtain generalisable trends from numerical data and then deepened the interpretation through participants' narrative insights. The integration of both data provided a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' cognitive and affective responses toward open-ended methods. By first identifying patterns of perception through survey data and subsequently explaining these patterns through narrative reflections, the study ensures complementarity and interpretive depth.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in several public and private upper secondary schools in Eastern Jakarta, Indonesia, where English is taught as a compulsory subject to prepare students for communication skills and further education. Upper secondary schools in Indonesia emphasise practical and knowledge-oriented education; therefore, instructional approaches that foster communication skills, critical thinking, and learner autonomy are particularly relevant. The demographics can be seen below.

Table 1. Demographics of the Participants

Category	Sub-category	N = 23	%
Gender	Male	3	13.04
	Female	20	86.96
Age	< 30 years old	1	4.35
	30-40 years old	6	26.09
	41-50 years old	10	43.48
	> 50 years old	6	26.09
Teaching experience	< 5 years	3	13.04
	6-10 years	2	8.70
	11-15 years	6	26.09
	16-20 years	7	30.43
	> 20 years	5	21.74
Education background	Bachelor	18	78.26
	Master	5	21.74

The participants consisted of 23 EFL teachers, predominantly females, with 86.96% currently teaching at the upper secondary level. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they had direct experience teaching English and implementing classroom instructional strategies. The teachers varied in age, length of teaching experience and educational background (Bachelor and Master Programs),

which allowed for diverse perspectives regarding the implementation of open-ended methods in upper secondary education contexts (see Table 1).

Instruments and Measures

Two instruments were employed in this study: a questionnaire and narrative reflections. The questionnaire was adapted from Svanes & Andersson-Bakken (2023) and Karaman & Büyükkıdık (2023) to measure EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences toward open-ended methods in English instruction. Some samples of items include: (1) *"Open-ended methods can improve students' critical thinking skills in English language learning"*; and (2) *"Open-ended methods can improve students' ability to solve problems in English"*. It consisted of eight (8) Likert-scale items ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, focusing on perceived benefits which include: critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, motivation, implementation readiness, comfort level, and training needs. Its reliability score through Cronbach's Alpha revealed .77, showing a moderately acceptable level of internal consistency. The questionnaire provided quantitative data to identify overall trends and levels of agreement among participants.

To complement the survey data, teachers were also asked to provide non-structured narrative reflections describing their experiences when using open-ended methods in their English classrooms. These reflections enabled participants to elaborate on their instructional practices, perceived student responses, advantages, and challenges. The qualitative component provided contextual explanations for the quantitative findings and allowed for richer insights into teachers' pedagogical reasoning and experiential engagement.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases. In the first phase, the questionnaire was distributed to the 23 EFL teachers in an online format. They were given one week to complete the questionnaire. After analysing the quantitative results, the second phase involved collecting non-structured narrative reflections from all the participants. Teachers were invited to provide written reflections responding to open-ended prompts regarding their experiences with open-ended methods. This sequential procedure ensured that the qualitative data served to clarify and expand upon the statistical trends identified in the quantitative phase.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations, to determine overall perception levels. The results were interpreted to identify dominant trends in teachers' cognitive and affective responses. Meanwhile, qualitative data from narrative reflections were analysed using thematic analysis following the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Terry et al. (2017). The analysis involved the following steps:

- Data familiarisation
The researchers repeatedly read all reflections to gain a thorough understanding of the data and note initial ideas.
- Coding

Meaningful statements were assigned codes based on recurring keywords and ideas, such as creativity, critical thinking, student engagement, challenges, and training needs.

- Categorisation

Similar codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting common perceptions and experiences.

- Theme development

The categories were reviewed and refined to capture the essence of EFL teachers' experiences, ensuring coherence, consistency, and alignment with the research objectives.

- Interpretation

The themes were interpreted and integrated with the quantitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding open-ended methods in English instruction.

The use of descriptive statistical analysis and thematic analysis in mixed-methods research is believed to enhance validity through methodological triangulation and provides deeper insight into complex educational phenomena.

RESULTS

EFL teachers' perceptions of open-ended methods in English language learning

Table 2 presents EFL teachers' perceptions of open-ended methods in English instruction, indicating generally positive attitudes across all measured aspects. The results show that teachers strongly agree that open-ended methods contribute significantly to students' higher-order thinking skills, including critical thinking ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.92$), creativity ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.59$), and problem-solving ability ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.58$), as seen in the table that follows.

Table 2. EFL teachers' perceptions of open-ended methods in English instruction

No	Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
1	Open-ended methods can improve students' critical thinking skills in English language learning.	4.35	0	4.35	47.83	43.48	4.26	0.92
2	Open-ended methods can enhance students' creativity in using English.	0	0	4.35	47.83	47.83	4.43	0.59
3	Open-ended methods can improve students' ability to solve problems in English.	0	0	4.35	52.17	43.48	4.39	0.58
4	Open-ended methods can increase student motivation in learning English.	0	0	13.04	43.48	43.48	4.30	0.70
5	I feel comfortable using open-ended methods in English language learning.	0	0	13.04	56.52	30.43	4.17	0.65
6	I have sufficient ability to implement open-ended methods in English language learning.	0	0	26.09	52.17	21.74	3.96	0.71

7	The open-ended method can be easily integrated into the existing English curriculum.	0	0	13.04	69.57	17.39	4.04	0.56
8	I need additional training to improve my skills in using open-ended methods.	0	0	4.35	56.52	39.13	4.35	0.57

Notably, no respondents expressed disagreement with these statements, and the majority selected "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," highlighting a strong consensus regarding the pedagogical value of open-ended methods. Additionally, teachers reported that open-ended methods can enhance students' motivation in learning English ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.70$), further emphasising their perceived effectiveness in promoting active and meaningful engagement in the learning process.

In terms of teachers' readiness and implementation, the findings indicate that teachers generally feel comfortable using open-ended methods ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.65$) and believe that these methods can be integrated into the existing English curriculum ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.56$). However, teachers' self-perceived ability to implement open-ended methods was slightly lower ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.71$), suggesting that some teachers may still lack full confidence or experience in applying these strategies effectively. This interpretation is supported by the high level of agreement with the statement that additional training is needed ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.57$), indicating a clear demand for professional development. Overall, the findings suggest that while EFL teachers recognise the substantial benefits and feasibility of open-ended methods, targeted training and support are essential to strengthen teachers' implementation competence and maximise instructional effectiveness in the English classroom.

EFL teachers' experiences of implementing open-ended methods in teaching English

The qualitative analysis of EFL teachers' narrative reflections revealed several recurring themes related to their experiences of implementing open-ended methods in English instruction. These themes represent both the perceived benefits and challenges associated with the approach. Overall, teachers described open-ended methods as fostering students' creativity, critical thinking, and classroom engagement, while also highlighting implementation challenges and the need for further professional development. The five themes identified from the data were creativity, critical thinking, student engagement, challenges, and need for training. Together, these themes provided deeper insights into how teachers experienced and interpreted the use of open-ended methods in upper secondary EFL classrooms.

Creativity

The theme of creativity emerged prominently in EFL teachers' narrative reflections, indicating that open-ended methods play a significant role in fostering students' creative expression in English learning. Teachers observed that students gradually moved beyond limited, short responses toward more elaborated and original ideas when provided with open-ended prompts and appropriate scaffolding. Below are the excerpts from the respondents.

"Students become more creative in answering and expressing ideas."
(Respondent 2)

"Initially, students only gave short answers, but after I gave examples of simple sentences, they began to dare to provide more creative answers. Discussions became more lively because students responded to each other." (Respondent 12).

It can be concluded that students became more creative in answering and expressing ideas as described by Respondent 2, while Respondent 12 highlighted that initial hesitation diminished after modelling simple sentence structures, leading students to produce more varied and imaginative responses. This shift was also accompanied by more dynamic classroom interaction, as students began to respond to one another, creating a more engaging and collaborative learning environment. These reflections suggest that open-ended methods not only stimulate creativity but also build students' confidence to experiment with language, ultimately supporting more meaningful and interactive communication in the EFL classroom.

Critical thinking

The theme of critical thinking is strongly evident in teachers' narrative reflections, highlighting how open-ended methods foster deeper cognitive engagement in EFL classrooms. Below are the excerpts from the respondents.

"When teaching in class, I always facilitate students in group discussions, provide open questions during presentations, and vice versa; students can ask open questions to me, or between students, to develop their critical thinking." (Respondent 4)

"Students become more stimulated to convey their ideas and opinions and ask critical questions in the English learning process in class, without being overshadowed by the fear of making mistakes in their delivery as they use a foreign language like English." (Respondent 16)

"This method really helped students think critically by responding to the questions posed." (Respondent 19)

From the qualitative reflections, Respondent 4 reported that strategies such as group discussions, open-ended questioning, and reciprocal interaction between teachers and students created opportunities for learners to analyse, evaluate, and respond thoughtfully. Meanwhile, Respondent 16 emphasised the role of dialogic practices, where students not only answered questions but also generated their own inquiries, thereby actively constructing knowledge. Additionally, Respondents 16 and 19 observed that open-ended methods helped reduce students' fear of making mistakes, enabling them to express opinions and pose critical questions more confidently in English. This supportive environment appeared to encourage risk-taking and reflective thinking, which were essential components of critical thinking development. These reflections suggest that open-ended instruction facilitates a more interactive and intellectually stimulating classroom atmosphere, where students are empowered to engage in meaningful reasoning and inquiry.

Student engagement

The theme of student engagement is notably reflected in teachers' narratives, indicating that open-ended methods effectively stimulate active participation and curiosity in EFL classrooms. Below are the excerpts from the respondents.

"My students were very enthusiastic in responding and even improvising." (Respondent 1).

"They were more enthusiastic in class and more curious, asking lots of questions about each key point of the lesson." (Respondent 3).

"Students were able to explore and learn to express their opinions more critically." (Respondent 11).

From the narrative reflections, Respondents 1 and 3 found that students became more enthusiastic in responding to tasks and even went beyond expectations by improvising their answers, suggesting a higher level of cognitive and emotional involvement. Increased curiosity was also evident, as students asked more questions and showed deeper interest in lesson content, reflecting a shift from passive reception to active inquiry. Furthermore, Respondent 11 noted that students were able to explore ideas more freely and expressed their opinions more critically and thoughtfully. These reflections suggest that open-ended instruction fosters a dynamic and participatory learning environment, where students are more motivated, engaged, and willing to take an active role in their language learning process.

Challenges

The theme of challenges highlights several constraints teachers encountered when implementing open-ended methods in EFL classrooms. Below are the excerpts from the respondents.

"When applying this method, students struggle when they are provided with complex questions that require critical thinking." (Respondent 5)

"Students begin to express their opinions, but remain hesitant to use English effectively and fully." (Respondent 20)

Regarding these reflections above, Respondent 5 noted that some students struggled to respond to complex, open-ended questions that demanded higher-order thinking, indicating that not all learners were equally prepared for such cognitive demands. In addition, linguistic limitations remained a significant barrier, as students who began to express their ideas often hesitated to use English fully and accurately, as described by Respondent 20. This suggested that while open-ended methods could stimulate participation, students' limited language proficiency might restrict the depth and clarity of their responses. These reflections imply that effective implementation of open-ended instruction requires careful scaffolding, including simplifying questions, providing language support, and gradually increasing task complexity to align with students' cognitive and linguistic readiness.

Need for training

The theme of the need for training reflects teachers' awareness of the importance of

continuous professional development in effectively implementing open-ended methods. Below are the excerpts from the respondents.

"However, I still need to have more training to implement such methods."
(Respondent 4)

"I usually ask open-ended questions, allow students to respond, and facilitate the discussion process in teaching English in class, but I need to continue to improve my teaching methods to be more effective." (Respondent 10)

It could be implied that while Respondents 4 and 10 reported their pedagogical practices, such as open-ended questioning, student responses, and facilitated discussions, they acknowledged that their current strategies could be further refined to achieve greater effectiveness. This indicated a gap between initial adoption and mastery of the approach, where teachers recognised the value of open-ended instruction but still sought deeper pedagogical knowledge and skills. The reflections suggested that sustained training was necessary to enhance teachers' ability to design meaningful open-ended tasks, manage classroom interaction, and provide appropriate scaffolding for students. This theme underscores the importance of ongoing professional support to ensure the successful and consistent application of open-ended methods in EFL classrooms.

These qualitative findings strongly support the quantitative results presented in [Table 2](#) by illustrating how EFL teachers' positive perceptions of open-ended methods are reflected in their classroom experiences. Consistent with the high mean scores on items related to creativity, critical thinking, and student motivation, teachers reported that open-ended activities encouraged students to generate more creative responses, engage in meaningful discussions, and actively participate in learning. Narrative reflections revealed that students became more confident in expressing ideas, asking questions, and responding to peers, which contributed to a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment. EFL Teachers also highlighted that open-ended questioning and group discussions facilitated deeper thinking and allowed students to explore multiple perspectives, reinforcing the quantitative finding that such methods enhance higher-order thinking skills and learner engagement.

At the same time, the qualitative data provide important nuance to the quantitative results, particularly regarding EFL teachers' readiness and challenges in implementation. While survey responses indicated general comfort with open-ended methods, EFL teachers' reflections revealed that students sometimes struggled with complex questions and experienced hesitation due to limited English proficiency. Additionally, teachers acknowledged the need for further training to effectively design and implement open-ended tasks, which aligns with the relatively lower mean score for self-perceived ability and the high agreement on the need for professional development. These insights suggest that although EFL teachers recognise the benefits and feasibility of open-ended methods, their successful implementation depends on adequate scaffolding for students and continuous support for teachers, thereby enriching the interpretation of the quantitative findings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL teachers hold strongly positive perceptions of open-ended methods, particularly in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and student engagement. Quantitatively, high mean scores across these constructs are reinforced by qualitative reflections showing increased student participation, idea generation, and interactive learning. These results align with recent studies indicating that open-ended tasks promote cognitive engagement by requiring students to interpret, evaluate, and generate ideas rather than recall fixed responses (Monrat et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2023). Furthermore, research in secondary EFL contexts shows that teachers actively integrate strategies such as questioning and discussion to promote critical thinking, which is consistent with this study's findings on the use of open-ended questioning and group interaction (Li, 2023). Thus, the current results confirm that open-ended methods are pedagogically effective in promoting higher-order thinking and communicative competence.

The qualitative findings further deepen the interpretation by showing how open-ended methods create a more dynamic and student-centered learning environment. EFL teachers reported that students became more creative, confident, and willing to express ideas, which are consistent with prior studies demonstrating that open-ended and inquiry-based approaches enhance creativity and learner autonomy across disciplines (Ritonga et al., 2026). Additionally, studies on EFL interaction suggest that dialogic and collaborative learning environments facilitate deeper engagement and knowledge construction, particularly when students are encouraged to respond to peers and ask questions (Xia & Xu, 2024). This supports the present study's qualitative evidence that open-ended instruction promotes active participation and meaningful communication. Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative results converge to indicate that open-ended methods are effective in transforming passive learning into active inquiry-based engagement.

However, the study also reveals important challenges that align with previous research, particularly regarding students' cognitive readiness and language proficiency. EFL teachers reported that students struggled with complex questions and hesitated to express ideas fully in English, which is consistent with research indicating that critical thinking development in EFL contexts is influenced by learners' language ability and learning styles (Kim, 2023). Moreover, studies on technology and critical thinking highlight that while innovative approaches can enhance engagement, they may also introduce cognitive load and require adequate scaffolding to be effective (Ran, 2025; Schenck, 2024). These findings suggest that open-ended methods are not inherently effective without appropriate instructional support, such as simplified questioning, modeling, and gradual progression of task difficulty. Thus, the present study supports the view that pedagogical effectiveness depends not only on method selection but also on alignment with learners' readiness and context.

Another key finding concerns EFL teachers' perceived need for professional development, which reflects a gap between positive beliefs and practical implementation. While EFL teachers showed confidence in the value of open-ended methods, their lower self-perceived competence and strong agreement on the need

for training indicate challenges in pedagogical execution. This aligns with a previous study showing that teachers' conceptual understanding of critical thinking does not always translate into effective classroom practice due to limited training and institutional constraints (Li, 2023). Similarly, research on innovative instructional approaches highlights that successful implementation requires sustained professional support, curriculum design, and assessment alignment (Beldar, 2025). Therefore, the current findings reinforce the importance of teacher development programs to bridge the gap between theoretical awareness and practical application.

Notably, this present study offers a distinctive contribution compared to previous research by integrating both cognitive (perceptions) and affective (feelings and experiences) dimensions of EFL teachers in an upper secondary EFL context. While many prior studies have focused on student outcomes, experimental interventions, or higher education settings (Monrat et al., 2022; Özen & Mert, 2024) this study highlights upper secondary school teachers' perspectives in Indonesia, which remain underexplored. Additionally, unlike some studies that report mixed or contradictory attitudes toward innovative methods, this study found consistently positive perceptions despite acknowledged challenges. This suggests that EFL teachers in upper secondary school contexts may be more open to adopting communicative and student-centred approaches. Therefore, the findings extend existing literature by emphasising the importance of contextual factors and teacher cognition in shaping the adoption of open-ended methods, while also confirming both their potential benefits and implementation constraints.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that EFL teachers hold highly positive perceptions of open-ended methods, recognising their significant potential to promote students' critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills, and learning motivation in English classrooms. The quantitative findings demonstrated strong agreement across all pedagogical benefit indicators, while the qualitative reflections further confirmed that open-ended methods foster a more student-centred, interactive, and psychologically supportive learning environment. EFL teachers observed that students became more confident in expressing ideas, engaging in discussions, and asking critical questions without fear of making mistakes. However, the findings also reveal a gap between teachers' positive beliefs and their perceived ability to implement these methods effectively. Challenges such as students' limited English proficiency, difficulty responding to complex questions, and teachers' need for stronger pedagogical skills highlight that successful implementation requires not only awareness but also adequate support and scaffolding strategies.

Despite these promising findings, this study has several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to broader EFL teaching contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported perceptions, which may not fully reflect actual classroom practices. Third, the study did not include direct classroom observations or student performance data to measure the actual impact of open-ended methods on learning outcomes. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across different

educational levels and regions, as well as employ mixed-method designs incorporating classroom observations, in-depth interviews from teachers and students, and student achievement tests. In addition, professional development programs focusing on the design and implementation of open-ended tasks should be developed to strengthen EFL teachers' pedagogical competence and confidence. Institutional support, including curriculum flexibility and ongoing training, is also essential to ensure the effective and sustainable integration of open-ended methods in EFL instruction. The findings of this study are impactful for several parties. For EFL teachers, the results provide insights into the pedagogical benefits and challenges of implementing open-ended methods in English instruction. For schools and educational institutions, the findings highlight the importance of providing professional development programs, curriculum support, and instructional resources to facilitate student-centred learning. For policymakers, the study offers evidence supporting the integration of open-ended and higher-order thinking-oriented approaches into upper secondary English education to better prepare students for academic demands in the 21st century.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Tri Wintolo Apoko: Conceptualisation (lead), methodology (lead), writing original draft (lead), review (supporting), editing (supporting), securing funding. **Zuhad Ahmad:** Conceptualisation (supporting), methodology (supporting), writing original draft (supporting), review (lead), editing (supporting). **Martriwati:** Conceptualisation (supporting), methodology (supporting), writing original draft (supporting), review (supporting), editing (lead).

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