



Implementing Discussion-Based Pedagogy in the EFL Classroom: Frameworks, Practices, and Emerging Challenges

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes recent research on discussion-based pedagogy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, with particular attention to the period from 2016 to 2025. It examines how discussion-based learning supports communicative competence, critical thinking, motivation, and intercultural awareness, and it considers the classroom conditions that enable or constrain these outcomes. The review is informed by key perspectives in language education, including Communicative Language Teaching, Sociocultural Theory, Translanguaging Pedagogy, and Interactional Competence Theory, all of which frame classroom discussion as a socially situated process of meaning-making. Across the literature, five major discussion types emerge: critical and analytical discussions, translanguaging-based discussions, drama and role-play discussions, task-based and problem-solving discussions, and global or online discussions. The review also shows that technology has widened the scope of discussion through blended learning, online platforms, and AI-mediated interaction. These innovations can extend participation, provide feedback, and support multilingual communication, but their pedagogical value depends on teacher mediation and digital literacy. At the same time, the literature identifies persistent challenges, including unequal participation, tension between fluency and accuracy, limited teacher preparation, assessment constraints, and the influence of exam-oriented or teacher-centered educational cultures. The paper concludes that discussion-based pedagogy remains one of the most effective and adaptable approaches in EFL education, provided that it is scaffolded carefully, aligned with curriculum and assessment, and supported by institutional and technological resources.

Keywords: *discussion-based pedagogy, EFL, communicative competence, translanguaging, online discussion*

1. Introduction

The rise of communicative and learner-centered paradigms has significantly reshaped English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Within this shift, classroom discussion has emerged as a central pedagogical practice for promoting authentic interaction, critical engagement, and collaborative meaning-making. Rather than treating language as a set of isolated forms, discussion-based pedagogy positions it as a social resource through which learners express ideas, negotiate understanding, and participate in meaningful exchange [1], [2].

This orientation reflects broader developments in contemporary language teaching, particularly the emphasis on communicative competence, task-based learning, and intercultural communication. Through discussion, learners apply linguistic knowledge in purposeful contexts, bridge form and meaning, and build confidence in using English as a medium of interaction. At the same time, discussion supports wider educational aims by encouraging perspective-taking, reasoning, and learner agency [3], [4].

Despite these advantages, discussion-based pedagogy is not always easy to implement. In many EFL settings, teachers work within exam-oriented systems, large classes, or instructional traditions that still favor teacher-fronted delivery and accuracy-based assessment. As a result, discussions may be constrained by limited teacher preparation, unequal participation, and insufficient institutional support [5]. This paper examines discussion-based pedagogy as both a promising and a complex approach to EFL teaching.

2. Literature Review

Research consistently demonstrates that discussion-based pedagogy is highly effective in EFL education, particularly for developing communicative competence, motivation, and intercultural awareness. Across diverse contexts, structured discussions improve both linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency by

engaging learners in purposeful interaction [6], [7]. These findings are supported by key perspectives in language education: Communicative Language Teaching positions discussion as authentic language use; Sociocultural Theory explains learning through interaction, mediation, and scaffolding; Translanguaging Pedagogy highlights the role of learners' full linguistic repertoires; and Interactional Competence Theory emphasizes the conversational skills developed through participation [1], [2], [8], [9].

2.1 Discussion and Communicative Competence

A substantial body of research identifies discussion as central to communicative competence. By requiring learners to express opinions, negotiate meaning, and respond spontaneously, discussions promote language use that is functional, contextualized, and socially meaningful. Al Zahrani and Elyas found that structured discussion tasks improved discourse organization and the ability to articulate opinions, while Park showed that discussions based on authentic news texts enhanced vocabulary development, sociocultural understanding, and critical engagement [6], [10]

From a sociocultural perspective, discussion creates opportunities for learners to build knowledge collaboratively through feedback, mediation, and scaffolding within interaction [8]. Meta-analytic evidence likewise confirms that oral interaction remains one of the most effective means of fostering communicative competence, especially when discussions are guided by meaningful prompts and clear communicative goals [7]. Task-based discussions are especially effective because they embed language in problem-solving and shared goals, leading to gains in fluency, accuracy, and learner engagement [11].

2.2 Technology, Multimodality, and AI-Mediated Discussion

Recent studies show that technology has significantly expanded the scope of discussion-based pedagogy. In blended and flipped learning environments, learners can engage with materials before class and use classroom time for deeper interaction, reflection, and feedback [12]. Online and blended discussion platforms enhance learner autonomy and communicative depth, while digital discussion boards promote reflection and peer collaboration [13], [14]

These developments also reinforce the multimodal nature of contemporary EFL communication, where interaction increasingly combines spoken language, writing, visuals, and digital tools. Within this context, AI has emerged as a major development. AI tools, including ChatGPT, can support reflective discussion, provide reformulations and prompts, and facilitate translanguaging through translation and adaptive feedback [15], [16]. Such tools may lower anxiety, increase confidence, and widen participation, especially when their use is carefully mediated by teachers.

2.3 Teacher Readiness and Digital Literacy

The effectiveness of discussion-based pedagogy depends heavily on teacher readiness. As discussions become more technologically mediated, teachers must combine digital competence with sound pedagogical judgment. This includes designing meaningful discussion tasks, maintaining communicative authenticity, and ensuring that participation remains equitable [3], [17]. Without deliberate facilitation, discussion spaces—especially online ones—can reproduce unequal participation patterns, with more confident or proficient learners dominating exchanges [18].

From this perspective, the teacher's role is less that of information provider and more that of mediator, organizer, and interactional guide. Teachers need to scaffold discussion, manage turn-taking, support quieter learners, and assess communicative performance in ways that value interaction as well as accuracy. They must also foster critical digital literacy so that learners can participate responsibly and effectively in digital and intercultural communication [8], [19].

2.4 Motivation, Inclusion, and Intercultural Growth

Beyond linguistic gains, discussion-based pedagogy has a strong affective dimension. Research indicates that discussions can reduce foreign language anxiety and increase willingness to communicate by creating supportive, collaborative environments in which learners can test ideas without excessive fear of correction



[20]. Small-group interaction is particularly helpful in this regard, as it lowers performance pressure and encourages peer support.

This motivational value is reinforced when learners are given space to express personal views and draw, when necessary, on familiar linguistic resources. Translanguaging-informed discussion practices can enhance both inclusion and confidence, particularly for learners with lower proficiency [21], [16]. Discussion-based pedagogy also contributes significantly to intercultural communicative competence. Discussions centered on cultural themes and global issues foster intercultural sensitivity, empathy, and critical cultural awareness [22], [23]. Cross-border online discussions, in particular, improve communicative flexibility and global perspective [24].

3. Findings: Types and Implementation of Discussions

The literature identifies five major forms of discussion-based pedagogy in EFL classrooms: critical and analytical discussions, translanguaging-based discussions, drama and role-play discussions, task-based and problem-solving discussions, and global or online discussions. Although each type emphasizes different learning goals, all are grounded in interaction, learner agency, and collaborative meaning-making.

3.1 Critical and Analytical Discussions

In classroom practice, these discussions are most effective when they are carefully staged rather than introduced as free debate from the outset. Pre-discussion reading, question prompts, and role allocation help learners move from comprehension to analysis and finally to position-taking. This structure is especially important in EFL settings where students may have ideas to share but lack the discourse markers, rhetorical language, or confidence needed to sustain argument in English. When teachers model useful phrases for agreeing, disagreeing, qualifying claims, and citing evidence, learners are better able to participate in academically oriented discussion without losing spontaneity.

Critical discussion also supports disciplinary literacy by familiarizing learners with the language of reasoning, comparison, and evaluation. In this sense, its value extends beyond speaking practice. Students learn how to formulate defensible positions, respond to challenges, and organize ideas coherently for an audience. These abilities are central not only to oral communication but also to academic writing and presentation tasks, making critical discussion a particularly productive bridge between language learning and broader educational outcomes [6], [10].

Critical and analytical discussions include debates, Socratic seminars, and thematic discussions that require learners to justify opinions, evaluate ideas, and respond to alternative perspectives. These formats are especially effective for developing higher-order thinking alongside linguistic competence [6], [10]. They move learners beyond comprehension toward interpretation and argumentation, supporting participation in academic and intercultural discourse communities.

3.2 Translanguaging-Based Discussions

A further strength of translanguaging-based discussion is that it can be strategically controlled rather than left entirely open. Teachers may, for example, allow learners to brainstorm in the first language, compare concepts bilingually, and then report or summarize in English. Such sequencing preserves English as the target language while recognizing that multilingual learners often think through complex ideas more effectively when they can move across languages. This is particularly valuable in mixed-ability classrooms, where selective translanguaging can narrow participation gaps and help less proficient students remain cognitively engaged.

The literature also suggests that translanguaging changes the classroom climate by legitimizing learners' identities and reducing the stigma attached to partial or hesitant English production. Rather than interpreting first-language use as failure, this approach treats it as a temporary mediational resource that supports fuller participation in discussion. In digital settings, this process can be amplified through captions, translation features, and bilingual AI prompts, which make multilingual interaction more manageable and inclusive [16], [21].

Translanguaging-based discussions allow learners to draw on both English and their first language(s) to clarify meaning, build ideas, and sustain participation. In multilingual EFL classrooms, this practice has been

shown to increase inclusion, reduce anxiety, and support conceptual understanding, especially for learners with lower proficiency [21], [16]. Digital and AI-supported environments can strengthen such practices by providing translation, reformulation, and multilingual feedback.

3.3 Drama and Role-Play Discussions

Another advantage of drama-based discussion is that it helps learners rehearse language for socially complex situations that are difficult to practice through ordinary classroom conversation. Simulated service encounters, job interviews, negotiations, or conflict-resolution scenarios require students to interpret roles, manage politeness, and adjust register in real time. Because meaning is carried not only by words but also by gesture, tone, and stance, these activities strengthen pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness in ways that conventional question-and-answer exchanges often do not.

Drama-based formats also create space for reflection after performance. Post-task debriefing allows learners to analyze what expressions were effective, where misunderstandings occurred, and how different linguistic choices shaped the interaction. This reflective stage is important because it turns performance into explicit learning, linking creative participation with clearer awareness of discourse conventions and interactional choices [25].

Drama and role-play discussions introduce an embodied and performative dimension to language learning. By simulating interviews, negotiations, storytelling, or everyday social encounters, these activities allow learners to practice language in realistic and emotionally engaging contexts. They are especially useful for developing pragmatic awareness, pronunciation, and sociolinguistic sensitivity [25].

3.4 Task-Based and Problem-Solving Discussions

Task-based discussion is particularly valuable in contexts where English exposure outside the classroom is limited. Because learners are required to reach an outcome together, they have repeated reasons to ask follow-up questions, clarify intention, and reformulate ideas. These features generate rich opportunities for negotiation of meaning, which has long been regarded as one of the central mechanisms of second-language development. The collaborative nature of task completion also helps shift attention away from fear of error and toward shared accomplishment.

Not all tasks, however, generate equally rich discussion. Research indicates that open problems, decision-making tasks, and information-gap activities are generally more productive than highly predictable exercises because they require genuine exchange and multiple possible responses. The pedagogical implication is that teachers must design tasks with communicative pressure and intellectual engagement in mind; otherwise, discussion may become procedural rather than exploratory [7], [11], [13].

Task-based and problem-solving discussions are among the most strongly supported forms of discussion in literature. In these activities, learners use language to solve a problem, make a decision, or plan a project. Their effectiveness lies in the fact that language is used as a tool for achieving shared outcomes rather than as an end in itself, creating conditions for negotiation of meaning, peer feedback, and collaborative reasoning [11], [13].

3.5 Global and Online Discussions

The educational significance of global and online discussions lies not only in the expansion of interactional space but also in the diversification of audiences. When learners speak or write to peers from other institutions or countries, English becomes a real medium of exchange rather than a classroom display language. This shift often increases investment and attentiveness because students recognize that successful communication now depends on clarity, responsiveness, and intercultural sensitivity, not simply on meeting a teacher's expectations.

At the same time, online discussion introduces new demands. Learners must manage delayed responses, multimodal cues, and platform-specific conventions such as chat etiquette, camera use, or threaded replies. These demands can be pedagogically valuable because they develop digital communication skills alongside language competence. When thoughtfully moderated, online discussion therefore extends the scope of EFL pedagogy to include not only spoken fluency but also online presence, multimodal expression, and responsible participation in networked communication [15], [22], [24].

Across these five formats, a common principle emerges: discussion-based pedagogy works best when interaction is purposeful, inclusive, and matched to learner needs. Some formats privilege reasoning, others support multilingual mediation or creative role-taking, and still others foreground collaboration or intercultural exchange. Yet all require learners to listen, respond, adapt, and co-construct meaning, which explains why discussion remains one of the most productive vehicles for communicative development in EFL classrooms. Global and online discussions represent the most recent expansion of discussion-based pedagogy. Through videoconferencing, online forums, and international collaboration projects, EFL learners can interact with peers across cultures and contexts. These formats develop intercultural awareness as well as digital and multimodal literacy, since learners often combine written, spoken, and visual communication across platforms [24], [22]. AI tools further extend these possibilities by supporting multilingual interaction, automated feedback, and individualized prompts [15], [16].

4. Discussion: Advantages and Challenges

Discussion-based pedagogy offers a comprehensive framework for developing linguistic, cognitive, affective, and intercultural competencies in EFL education. By positioning language as a tool for interaction and meaning-making, it transforms the classroom into a space of collaborative inquiry.

4.1 Benefits

Another important benefit is that discussion enables learners to integrate multiple dimensions of language performance at the same time. In a single discussion task, students may need to retrieve vocabulary, monitor grammar, interpret a peer's intention, choose an appropriate stance, and react within time pressure. This integration mirrors real communication far more closely than decontextualized exercises. For that reason, discussion often provides stronger evidence of usable proficiency than activities that isolate one language component at a time.

Discussion also supports the development of learner agency. Because students must make choices about what to say, how strongly to say it, and how to respond to others, they are positioned as active contributors rather than recipients of content. Over time, this can reshape classroom dynamics by making participation more dialogic and less dependent on teacher initiation. Such a shift is particularly valuable in EFL environments where opportunities for extended learner talk are otherwise limited.

From a longer-term perspective, the benefits of discussion-based pedagogy may be cumulative. Repeated exposure to structured discussion can build habits of listening carefully, formulating ideas under pressure, and tolerating ambiguity during communication. These are not only linguistic skills but also transferable academic and professional competencies. As a result, discussion-based learning contributes to the wider educational aim of preparing learners to participate effectively in collaborative and multilingual environments [7], [8], [9].

From a linguistic perspective, discussion-based learning promotes fluency, lexical development, and pragmatic competence. Unlike teacher-centered instruction, it requires learners to produce extended discourse, respond spontaneously, and adapt language to context and audience [13], [9]. Cognitively, it supports critical thinking and metacognitive awareness by encouraging learners to evaluate information, construct arguments, and reflect on different perspectives.

Discussion also has important affective and social benefits. It reduces foreign language anxiety, increases willingness to communicate, and fosters a sense of community through collaboration and peer support [20]. In addition, by engaging learners with cultural topics and global issues, it strengthens intercultural communicative competence and prepares students for more diverse communicative contexts [22], [23].

4.2 Persistent Challenges

A further challenge concerns the quality of discussion prompts and task framing. Even when teachers allocate time for discussion, interaction can remain superficial if questions invite only short, predictable answers or if students do not have sufficient conceptual preparation. Effective discussion depends on tasks that are cognitively engaging, linguistically accessible, and open enough to sustain multiple viewpoints. In

practice, designing such tasks can be demanding, particularly when teachers work with rigid textbooks or limited planning time.

Assessment poses an additional difficulty because discussion performance is dynamic and distributed across participants. It is often easier to evaluate an individual written product than to capture the quality of contribution, responsiveness, and collaboration in a live discussion. Without clear rubrics, assessment may appear subjective, which can discourage teachers from integrating discussion regularly. Yet if discussion is not assessed at all, students may interpret it as peripheral rather than central to learning.

There are also challenges related to learner beliefs. Some students may equate good language learning with correction, memorization, and teacher explanation, and may therefore view discussion as less serious or less efficient. Others may avoid speaking because they associate public language use with loss of face or exposure of weakness. For discussion-based pedagogy to succeed, teachers often need to address these beliefs explicitly, showing students how interaction contributes to learning and why partial, developing language can still be pedagogically valuable [5], [18], [20].

Despite these advantages, several challenges complicate implementation. Teachers often struggle to balance fluency and accuracy when providing feedback. Unequal participation is another common problem, as more confident or proficient learners may dominate discussions while others remain passive [18]. Teacher preparedness also remains a key issue, since effective facilitation requires expertise in scaffolding, interaction management, and digital pedagogy [17], [19].

Institutional constraints such as large classes, rigid curricula, and exam-oriented systems often leave limited space for open-ended discussion [7]. Cultural factors may also influence participation, especially where learners are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and hesitate to express opinions or challenge others. These conditions make discussion-based pedagogy highly effective, but also strongly context-dependent.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The literature points to several important implications for EFL teaching. First, discussion must be scaffolded through pre-discussion support, role assignment, and gradual progression from controlled interaction to more open-ended exchange. Second, teacher development is essential. Teachers need preparation not only in language instruction, but also in facilitation, digital pedagogy, and assessment of interaction. Finally, institutions must provide supportive conditions, including reasonable class sizes, flexible classroom layouts, and assessment practices that recognize communicative performance.

These implications suggest that discussion-based pedagogy should be planned as a coherent instructional approach rather than treated as an occasional speaking activity. When discussion is added only at the end of a lesson, without preparation, follow-up, or assessment, its impact is often limited. By contrast, when it is integrated into lesson objectives, materials, and classroom routines, learners begin to understand that discussion is a central route to language development rather than a supplementary exercise.

Scaffolding is especially important at the level of discourse. Many learners know relevant vocabulary or grammar but struggle to enter a conversation, extend a turn, or disagree politely. For this reason, discussion instruction should include discourse frames, model exchanges, and explicit attention to interactional moves such as inviting a partner in, asking for clarification, or building on a previous point. These supports help transform passive linguistic knowledge into usable communicative behavior.

Teachers may also need to scaffold content knowledge. Discussions are rarely productive when learners have little to say about the topic. Short readings, visuals, case studies, or advance questions can provide the conceptual foundation needed for richer interaction. In this sense, effective scaffolding supports both language and ideas, ensuring that students are prepared to participate meaningfully rather than merely speak for the sake of speaking.

Teacher development should therefore include opportunities to observe, analyze, and rehearse discussion facilitation. Watching recordings of classroom interaction, examining transcripts, or engaging in peer observation can help teachers notice patterns that are otherwise easy to miss, such as unequal turn distribution, over-scaffolding, or missed opportunities for follow-up questioning. This kind of professional reflection is particularly useful because discussion quality often depends on subtle interactional decisions made in real time.

Facilitation also involves knowing when not to intervene. Teachers who dominate the interaction, answer too quickly, or correct every error may unintentionally reduce learner initiative. Professional development



should therefore help teachers distinguish between supportive mediation and excessive control, so that discussions remain both structured and genuinely learner-centered.

In digitally mediated discussion, pedagogy must also account for access and usability. Teachers need contingency plans for uneven connectivity, different device types, and varying levels of student familiarity with online platforms. Seemingly technical issues can quickly become participation issues if some learners cannot follow the discussion smoothly or are unsure how to contribute in a particular format. Digital literacy, therefore, is inseparable from inclusion.

AI literacy should likewise include ethical and critical dimensions. Learners and teachers need guidance on when AI support is helpful, how to verify AI-generated language, and how to avoid over-reliance on automated responses that reduce authentic interaction. Used well, AI can expand practice and feedback; used uncritically, it can narrow learner agency by substituting generated language for genuine communicative effort.

Curriculum reform also requires progression. Discussion expectations should develop across levels, beginning with simple turn-taking and opinion sharing and moving toward argumentation, collaborative problem-solving, and intercultural dialogue. A sequenced curriculum makes it easier for teachers to align topics, tasks, and assessment with realistic developmental goals rather than treating discussion as a generic ability that should emerge automatically.

Similarly, assessment should balance individual accountability with recognition of discussion as co-constructed performance. Rubrics can include dimensions such as relevance, clarity, responsiveness, support for others' contributions, and strategic language use. When learners understand these criteria, they are more likely to approach discussion as a serious academic practice and not merely as informal conversation.

Institutional support also includes symbolic recognition. When school policies, timetables, and evaluation systems prioritize communicative outcomes, teachers are more likely to invest in discussion-rich pedagogy. Conversely, when oral interaction is absent from program goals or assessment frameworks, even motivated teachers may struggle to justify the time discussion requires. Sustainable implementation therefore depends on alignment between classroom practice and institutional expectations.

The literature points to several important implications for EFL teaching. First, discussion must be scaffolded through pre-discussion vocabulary work, guiding questions, role assignments, and sentence stems. Pair work and guided small-group tasks can prepare learners for more open-ended formats such as debates or intercultural discussions [8].

Second, teacher development is essential. Teachers need preparation not only in language instruction, but also in facilitation, assessment, digital literacy, and ethical AI use. Third, curricula and assessment practices should better reflect the value of oral interaction by including objectives and rubrics related to turn-taking, argumentation, negotiation of meaning, and intercultural responsiveness [7], [19].

Finally, institutions must provide supportive conditions, including reasonable class sizes, flexible classroom layouts, access to technology, and time for professional development. When these conditions are in place, discussion can function not simply as an activity but as a central mode of language learning.

6. Conclusion

Discussion-based pedagogy is one of the most significant developments in contemporary EFL education because it treats language as a tool for interaction, inquiry, and collaboration. Across the literature, it emerges as a powerful means of developing communicative competence, critical thinking, motivation, and intercultural awareness.

Its effectiveness is supported by complementary theoretical perspectives and by a wide range of classroom practices, from critical discussion and translanguaging to task-based, drama-based, and global online interaction. At the same time, its success depends on careful scaffolding, informed facilitation, technological awareness, and institutional support.

Looking ahead, digital and AI-mediated discussion is likely to play an increasingly important role in EFL education. These developments offer new opportunities for feedback, multilingual support, and cross-cultural interaction, but they should be used to extend human dialogue rather than replace it. In this sense, discussion-based pedagogy is not simply a teaching technique; it is a pedagogical orientation that places communication, participation, and shared inquiry at the center of language education.



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