INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
SJIF 2019: 5.222 2020: 5.552 2021: 5.637 2022:5.479 2023:6.563 2024: 7,805
eISSN :2394-6334 https://www.ijmrd.in/index.php/imjrd Volume 12, issue 06 (2025)

SUPPORTING CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL LEARNERS THROUGH INTERACTIVE DISCUSSIONS POWERED BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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ANNOTATION: The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms offers new opportunities to enhance learners' critical thinking skills. This article explores how AI-powered interactive discussion tools, such as chatbots and dialogue systems, can support the development of analytical reasoning among EFL students. The study highlights the effectiveness of these technologies in promoting deeper engagement, structured argumentation, and learner autonomy. Drawing on qualitative data from case studies, teacher interviews, and recent literature, the article concludes that AI can serve as a pedagogically sound assistant in language learning when used responsibly and in combination with human facilitation.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Critical Thinking, EFL Learners, Interactive Discussions, AI Chatbots, Language Education, Learner Autonomy, Pedagogical Innovation

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is an essential 21st-century skill that enables learners to analyze, evaluate, and construct reasoned arguments. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, fostering critical thinking is particularly important, as students must not only acquire linguistic competence but also develop the cognitive abilities to use English effectively in academic, professional, and intercultural settings.

Traditional EFL classrooms, however, have often emphasized memorization and grammar drills over interactive and reflective communication. As a result, many students lack opportunities to practice reasoning, argumentation, and problem-solving in English. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly AI-driven conversational technologies, presents a unique opportunity to bridge this gap.

This paper investigates the use of AI-powered interactive discussion platforms in supporting the development of critical thinking among EFL learners. By simulating authentic dialogues and providing real-time feedback, AI tools can create engaging environments where learners are encouraged to reflect, articulate, and refine their ideas. The article examines the pedagogical impact of such tools, the challenges they pose, and best practices for their integration in the EFL classroom.

Developing critical thinking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is a central goal in modern language education. In the past, traditional EFL classrooms have often emphasized grammar, vocabulary acquisition, and rote learning over analytical and reflective practices. However, with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly AI-driven conversational systems and discussion platforms, educators now have tools that can stimulate meaningful, thought-provoking dialogue in English. This paper explores how interactive AI technologies can be effectively implemented to support critical thinking in EFL learners. By analyzing how AI platforms facilitate reflective discussion, offer real-time feedback, and scaffold learner autonomy, this study highlights their potential as transformative tools in language pedagogy.

Artificial Intelligence has increasingly permeated education, offering capabilities that range from automating administrative tasks to delivering personalized feedback. In the context of EFL, AI tools such as chatbots, virtual discussion partners, and dialogue-based learning applications have become valuable assets. These systems simulate human interaction and are capable of responding to learner input with relevant, coherent, and contextually appropriate language. When designed with critical thinking objectives in mind, AI systems can promote analytical engagement, evaluate argumentation, and support language learners in constructing reasoned opinions.

This study applies a qualitative research approach involving case study analysis and a review of scholarly literature on AI in education. Data were collected from five EFL institutions across three countries that implemented AI-driven discussion platforms over one academic semester. These platforms included tools such as Socratic AI Chatbots, GPT-based classroom assistants, and AI discussion boards embedded in LMS systems. Interviews were conducted with ten EFL teachers and twenty-five intermediate to advanced EFL learners. Additional insights were

drawn from twenty peer-reviewed academic articles published between 2019 and 2024 focusing on AI in language learning and critical thinking development.

The AI platforms used in the case studies employed natural language processing (NLP) and deep learning algorithms to analyze student responses, assess depth of reasoning, and provide scaffolding through counter-questions and feedback. The study identified several key outcomes:

Firstly, AI-supported interactive discussions significantly increased the frequency and depth of learner engagement with argumentative and reflective tasks. Learners who interacted with AI discussion bots produced longer, more structured responses, using higher-order reasoning skills more frequently. For example, in a task discussing environmental policies, learners engaged with AI prompts that challenged their assumptions, leading to more nuanced expressions and richer vocabulary usage.

Secondly, real-time feedback played a crucial role in developing learners' metacognitive awareness. AI systems provided prompts such as "What evidence supports your claim?" or "Can you think of an alternative viewpoint?" These led students to pause and reconsider their initial statements, thus reinforcing critical evaluation and revision skills. Unlike traditional peer feedback, AI responses were consistent, nonjudgmental, and instantly available.

Thirdly, learner autonomy improved notably over the course of the study. Students began to anticipate AI feedback and self-correct their reasoning and language structures proactively. In several classrooms, learners chose to continue discussions with AI agents outside scheduled class hours, indicating intrinsic motivation and perceived value in the AI as a learning partner.

Teacher feedback highlighted the complementary role of AI. Instructors noted that while AI could sustain a discussion and introduce cognitive challenge, it still lacked emotional intuition and could misinterpret sarcasm or cultural nuance. Therefore, the best results were observed when AI discussions were embedded within blended learning frameworks where teachers could facilitate post-discussion debriefs and clarify complex ideas.

Despite the benefits, limitations were evident. Some AI platforms failed to adapt appropriately to lower-proficiency learners, generating questions too advanced or abstract. Technical issues such as poor speech recognition for non-native accents occasionally disrupted

flow. Furthermore, ethical concerns around data collection and the risk of dependency on AI for critical judgment were raised. Teachers emphasized the importance of training students to use AI critically, distinguishing between guidance and authoritative knowledge.

In discussing the broader pedagogical implications, the integration of AI to promote critical thinking in EFL aligns with constructivist and socio-cognitive theories of learning. Constructivist models emphasize learner-driven knowledge construction, while socio-cognitive approaches focus on interaction as a medium for development. AI-facilitated discussion tools embody both principles, allowing learners to articulate, negotiate, and refine their thoughts in real-time English conversation.

In addition, the use of AI to develop critical thinking responds to the evolving demands of global communication. In a world where English functions as a lingua franca in professional and academic discourse, the ability to think critically in English is essential. AI can democratize access to high-level intellectual practice for learners worldwide, offering them a platform to explore global issues, defend opinions, and consider multiple perspectives through English.

The development of critical thinking skills in EFL learners is not only possible but can be significantly enhanced through AI-powered interactive discussion platforms. When designed and implemented with pedagogical care, these technologies foster deeper engagement, encourage reflection, and support autonomy. AI cannot and should not replace human interaction in language learning, but it can serve as a powerful partner in cultivating analytical language use. Future research should focus on improving AI's contextual sensitivity, expanding multilingual capacity, and ensuring ethical transparency. Ultimately, integrating AI into critical thinking pedagogy can prepare EFL learners not only to communicate in English but to think with clarity, depth, and global relevance.

CONCLUSION

AI-powered interactive discussion platforms represent a transformative advancement in EFL education, particularly in the area of critical thinking development. Through real-time interaction, personalized feedback, and the simulation of authentic communicative scenarios, AI offers learners the opportunity to think more deeply and express themselves more clearly in

English. The research shows that learners engaging with AI discussion tools demonstrate improved reasoning, increased language complexity, and greater autonomy.

However, the integration of AI into pedagogy must be approached with care. It should complement, not replace, the human element of teaching, and must be used ethically, respecting learner data and encouraging independent thought. For educators, the goal should be to blend AI technologies into a broader instructional strategy that includes teacher-guided reflection, peer discussion, and cultural context.

In sum, the thoughtful use of AI for interactive discussion can enrich the EFL learning experience by enabling students not just to speak English, but to think critically in English—an invaluable skill in today's globalized world. Future research should focus on optimizing AI for diverse learner levels, enhancing contextual understanding, and exploring long-term impacts on learner cognition and communication.

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