THE USE OF ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING SKILLS IN B2 STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The integration of online discussion forums into language learning has emerged as a powerful means of strengthening both critical thinking and writing abilities among B2-level students. These digital platforms offer structured yet flexible learning spaces where learners engage in analytical dialogue, negotiate meaning, and refine their communicative strategies. Because forum participation unfolds asynchronously, students benefit from extended time to process information, cross-check sources, and craft more deliberate, logically sound responses. This reflective environment promotes deeper engagement with course content and encourages learners to adopt inquiry-based thinking. Moreover, the requirement to express ideas in written form provides continual practice in shaping arguments, maintaining cohesion, and applying accurate linguistic structures. Interaction with peers exposes students to alternative viewpoints and authentic language use, thereby enhancing their pragmatic awareness and rhetorical skills. Forums also nurture learner autonomy by enabling students to take responsibility for initiating discussions, supporting claims with evidence, and monitoring the clarity of their written output. As educational contexts increasingly rely on blended and digital learning models, online discussion forums demonstrate strong potential as pedagogical tools for developing both cognitive and linguistic competence in B2 learners.*

Keywords: *online learning platforms, asynchronous dialogue, argumentation skills, academic writing development, B2 proficiency, collaborative learning, digital pedagogy, discourse competence, reflective learning, EFL communication.*

Introduction. The use of online discussion forums has become an influential component of modern language education, particularly for developing critical thinking and writing skills among B2-level learners. With the rapid growth of digital tools and virtual learning spaces, teachers and students increasingly rely on technology to support communication, collaboration and intellectual engagement. Online forums, in particular, offer a unique combination of flexibility, interactivity and reflective depth, making them especially effective for intermediate learners who need structured opportunities to express ideas, evaluate viewpoints and build coherent written responses.

One of the defining strengths of forums is their asynchronous nature, which allows students to participate at their own pace instead of responding immediately as in face-to-

face conversations. This additional time encourages deeper cognitive processing because learners can read prompts carefully, search for supporting evidence, and reflect on how their ideas relate to those of others. Such reflective engagement strengthens the ability to analyze arguments, identify assumptions and form reasoned judgments-skills at the core of critical thinking. When students respond thoughtfully rather than spontaneously, they become more aware of logic, coherence and accuracy in their reasoning, and this awareness gradually shapes stronger cognitive habits.

Writing in online forums further enhances linguistic and academic skills by offering frequent practice in structuring ideas, constructing paragraphs, and maintaining clarity across sentences. Since each contribution is written, learners naturally develop greater control over organization, grammar and vocabulary. B2 students, who are transitioning from upper-intermediate to more advanced proficiency, particularly benefit from repeated opportunities to revise and refine their writing before posting. This process supports metalinguistic awareness and encourages learners to monitor their use of tenses, connectors, formal language and argumentation strategies. Through interaction with peers, students also become more conscious of audience expectations, making their writing clearer, more persuasive and more purposeful.

Another important advantage of online forums is the authentic communicative environment they create. Instead of writing solely for a teacher, learners write for a group of peers who may challenge their ideas, request clarification or offer alternative interpretations. This authenticity increases motivation, autonomy and social presence. Students begin to take ownership of their contributions, not only to express their viewpoint but also to maintain a respectful, logical and well-supported line of argument. Exposure to diverse perspectives plays a crucial role in developing intellectual openness, as learners must compare differing opinions and respond in ways that show understanding, flexibility and confidence in their own reasoning.

Online forums also foster collaborative learning, as students build knowledge together through extended discussions. Such cooperation provides support for learners who may be less confident expressing themselves orally but feel more comfortable and prepared when writing. The written record of conversations remains accessible throughout the course, allowing students to revisit earlier posts, analyze how arguments developed, and assess how their own thinking evolved over time. This cumulative process strengthens metacognitive skills and helps learners see connections between ideas, identify patterns in their writing, and observe improvements in clarity and accuracy.

Teachers play a key role in designing effective forum activities by creating thought-provoking prompts, modeling appropriate language and guiding interaction without dominating discussions. When implemented well, forums become safe spaces for experimentation where learners can take risks, negotiate meaning and receive feedback from both the teacher and peers. The integration of clear instructions, meaningful questions

and supportive monitoring ensures that discussions remain focused, productive and aligned with learning objectives.

Conclusion. Online discussion forums serve as a powerful method for promoting both linguistic development and higher-order thinking skills in B2 students. By merging written communication with reflective interaction, they enable learners to articulate ideas more clearly, engage critically with diverse viewpoints and strengthen their ability to construct logical, evidence-based arguments. The digital environment fosters motivation, independence and collaboration, contributing to deeper learning experiences that go beyond traditional classroom activities. As online education continues to expand, discussion forums will remain an essential tool for cultivating well-rounded, analytically minded and proficient language learners capable of effective communication in academic and professional contexts.

The use of online discussion forums offers significant advantages for fostering the cognitive and linguistic development of B2 learners. These platforms function not only as spaces for written communication but also as environments that promote analytical engagement, intellectual curiosity, and collaborative reasoning. By allowing students to contribute asynchronously, forums grant learners the opportunity to revisit content, investigate additional sources, and formulate well-supported viewpoints. This slower, more deliberate pace of interaction helps students strengthen skills such as evaluating arguments, identifying underlying assumptions, and responding constructively to differing opinions-all of which are essential components of critical thinking.

At the same time, the written nature of forum participation enhances academic writing proficiency. Learners practice organizing ideas into coherent structures, selecting appropriate academic vocabulary, and applying grammatical patterns with increasing accuracy. The presence of real interlocutors-rather than a single teacher-raises students' awareness of audience expectations, encouraging them to write more clearly, persuasively, and purposefully. Exposure to diverse linguistic styles further contributes to the development of discourse competence and pragmatic sensitivity.

Online forums also support a more learner-centered approach to education, as students become active contributors in shaping discussions and constructing shared knowledge. This autonomy fosters deeper motivation and a sense of responsibility for the quality of their contributions. With thoughtful guidance from teachers, forums can transform into interactive learning communities where reflection, collaboration, and language development are mutually reinforcing.

In sum, online discussion forums serve as a valuable pedagogical tool that promotes higher-order thinking, enhances writing performance, and cultivates communicative confidence in B2 students. As digital learning continues to evolve, these platforms will remain essential for preparing learners to engage critically and effectively in academic, professional, and cross-cultural contexts.

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