

DESIGNING DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. *This article examines the integration of language skills in language teaching, with a particular focus on designing discussion activities that promote communicative competence. Theoretical foundations, grounded in communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL), emphasize the simultaneous development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. By intertwining receptive and productive skills, discussion activities offer a holistic approach to language learning. The study highlights principles for crafting discussion tasks that engage learners in authentic and collaborative interactions, fostering critical thinking and fluency. Drawing on recent research and pedagogical models, this work demonstrates how well-designed discussion activities can bridge language skills while enhancing learner motivation and intercultural competence. Finally, practical recommendations are provided to guide educators in implementing integrated skill-based discussion strategies in language classrooms.*

Keywords: *skill integration, discussion activities, communicative competence, language teaching, CLT, TBL, learner engagement.*

Discussion-based teaching has long been recognized as a way to promote civic engagement (Bridges 1949; Lasker 1949). Recent studies have shown that discussion-based teaching makes social studies classes more interesting (Hess and Posselt 2002), and promotes the development of tolerance (Avery 2002). The integration of language skills in teaching has emerged as an essential component of effective language education, aiming to develop learners' communicative competence in a holistic manner. Traditional teaching methods often isolated skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—treating them as separate entities. However, this compartmentalized approach failed to reflect the interconnected nature of real-life communication. In contrast, skill integration fosters a more dynamic and practical learning environment, where learners simultaneously engage multiple skills, thereby preparing them for authentic communication scenarios.

One of the most effective ways to integrate skills is through discussion-based activities. Discussions naturally combine listening and speaking skills, while also encouraging learners to process information critically, drawing on their reading and writing skills. For example, a discussion activity on a topical issue, such as environmental conservation, might begin with learners reading an article or listening to a podcast. They would then collaborate in small groups to discuss their interpretations, summarize the key points, and propose solutions. This process not only bridges skills but also promotes higher-order thinking, creativity, and teamwork.

From a theoretical perspective, communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL) provide the foundational principles for designing such activities. CLT emphasizes meaningful interaction as the cornerstone of language learning, advocating for activities that mirror real-world communication. TBL complements this approach by focusing on the completion of specific tasks that require the use of integrated skills. For instance, in a classroom scenario, learners might role-play a business meeting where they discuss a problem, take notes, and later draft a written proposal. Such tasks align with the pedagogical goal of integrating skills seamlessly while maintaining learner engagement.

Moreover, discussion activities can be tailored to suit learners' proficiency levels and interests, making them both adaptable and inclusive. There are three important considerations when designing a discussion to engage students. First, the topic should be arguable, that is, it should allow for differing perspectives and multiple interpretations. Second, the discussion must be located within the students' existing knowledge base, or they will not be able to make the kind of informed comments that sustain a discussion. Third, the discussion must serve an educational purpose; that is, the discussion must engage and extend student thinking beyond their previous experiences. For beginners, simple discussions revolving around familiar topics, such as daily routines or favorite hobbies, can help build confidence and fluency. Advanced learners, on the other hand, can engage in debates or problem-solving activities that challenge them to articulate complex ideas and support their arguments with evidence. By aligning tasks with learners' abilities and needs, teachers can create a supportive environment that fosters gradual skill development.

The integration of skills through discussion also supports the development of critical thinking and intercultural competence. In a globalized world, language learners must not only master linguistic structures but also understand cultural nuances and diverse perspectives. For instance, a discussion activity about cultural festivals can expose learners to different traditions and customs, encouraging them to compare and contrast their own experiences with those of others. Such activities not only enhance language skills but also promote empathy, tolerance, and global awareness.

This approach is best used when teachers ask students to discuss previously unfamiliar concepts or experiences. Creating a context for this discussion occurs in two phases. First, students are exposed to new information through formats such as lectures, inquiry, and group or individual projects. Second, this information is made arguable by applying it in a real-world activity that requires judgment. These activities provide subject-specific experiences that students would not usually experience in their everyday lives outside school. Examples include debates, plays, learning projects, role-playing, mock trials and so on.

Furthermore, technology has become an invaluable tool in designing and implementing discussion activities that integrate skills. Digital platforms, such as online forums, video conferencing tools, and collaborative writing software, allow learners to engage in discussions beyond the confines of the classroom. Teachers can assign tasks like participating in online debates, creating group blogs, or analyzing multimedia content. These activities leverage technology to provide learners with authentic, interactive, and multimodal learning experiences that reflect the realities of 21st-century communication.

In conclusion, Discussion-based activities are a powerful tool for integrating language skills, fostering communicative competence, and promoting holistic language learning. Grounded in frameworks like communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL), they combine receptive and productive skills while encouraging critical thinking and intercultural awareness. By tailoring discussions to learners' needs and incorporating technology, educators can create engaging, real-world tasks that enhance linguistic abilities and prepare learners for diverse communication contexts. This approach not only strengthens language proficiency but also develops essential skills for lifelong learning and global engagement.

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