

Critical Digital Pedagogy in ESL Instruction: Multilingual Discourse and Participatory Justice

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Abstract

Foregrounding the argument that discourse is the pivot of education, this paper discusses how Critical Digital Pedagogy (CDP) can guide the use of digital tools to support discourse generation in ESL classrooms. The paper proposes a Discursive Agency Spectrum that maps learners' movement from silence to expression, participation, and multilingual authorship. Three digital strategies operationalise this continuum: backchannelling as a low-stakes entry into articulation of ideas; asynchronous discussions for deliberate participation, sustained engagement, and reflection; and AI-mediated translanguaging that repositions multilingual, multicultural repertoires as central to the construction of shared knowledge and facilitates agentic discourse. Used critically, these practices redistribute voice, legitimise diverse language repertoires, and expand students' epistemic agency. The paper suggests that multilingual digital contributions can contribute to AI corpora, thus aligning pedagogic practices that endorse linguistic justice with broader commitments to data justice.

Keywords: Critical digital pedagogy, discourse-based pedagogy, backchannelling, asynchronous dialogue, translanguaging, data justice

Discourse as the Goal of Education

It is tradition, not innovation, that education must foster the reflective practice of dialogue rather than merely support the passive reception of information (Dewey, 1933). The belief that sustained communication and collaborative meaning-making are fundamental to learning is more than two thousand years old. The dialectical method of classical philosophy, demonstrated by the Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian traditions,

acknowledges that knowledge emerges through discourse and employs techniques such as questioning, counterargument, and dialogues not to test memory or recall but to cultivate reasoning, reflection, and inquiry by getting learners to think, talk, and share their views with others (Alexander, 2020).

Contemporary pedagogies inherit this view that knowledge is constructed as a shared activity and not transmitted from teacher to learner. Freire (1970), emphasising that genuine education occurs when learners co-investigate reality, conceptualised dialogue as a means of consciousness-raising. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978), locating learning within social interaction, supported the idea that knowledge is constructed collaboratively through dialogue and reflection. Effective pedagogies recognise that learning is not the memorisation of content but the active creation of discourse that allows knowledge to be shared, examined, extended, challenged, constructed, and re-constructed (Littleton & Mercer, 2013).

Discourse as Cognitive and Social Practice

From a cognitive view, discourse externalises thought making reasoning visible, allowing learners to articulate, justify, and refine their ideas. When students present ideas, explain interpretations, negotiate meaning, and confirm understanding, they produce exploratory talk, which reorganises mental schemas, deepens comprehension, and builds conceptual understanding (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2017).

From a social perspective, collaborative discourse produced when participants work towards shared goals by exchanging, testing, and extending ideas (Nichols et al., 2000) positions learners within a community of inquiry, shaping identity and agency (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The ability to engage in sustained, reasoned discourse signals intellectual development as well as inclusion within the epistemic culture of education. Through such practices, learners see themselves as legitimate participants in a community of learning rather than passive recipients (Yamaguchi, 2025). Conversely, when discourse is constrained, learners are denied access to the collaborative construction of knowledge and the academic identities such participation affords.

Constraints to Discourse Generation in the Classroom

Interactional instructional strategies such as think-pair-share, Socratic questioning, and group discussions often constrain discourse due to

teacher-centricity and rigid turn-taking patterns that limit opportunities for initiation or extension of ideas (Nguyen, 2024). Hanh (2020) adds affective factors such as lack of confidence, fear of committing mistakes, limited recognition from teachers or peers, or low motivation that can further restrict participation.

The synchronicity and pace of the face-to-face classroom is another constraint—reflection requires time. Not all learners are ready to participate at the same time: learners with low topic familiarity and ESL learners with emerging linguistic competence need time to process and formulate ideas in English. Classrooms where everyone is expected to speak or write marginalise learners who process ideas differently, need additional planning time, or prefer non-oral modes of expression (Jose, 2024).

In ESL contexts, discourse is also shaped by language hierarchies. When learners are expected to collaborate in English, fluent speakers are privileged and those with lower proficiency are silenced. Many hesitate to speak resulting in the gradual devaluation of their home languages, reproducing what Phillipson (1992) calls ‘linguistic imperialism’—where English becomes the only legitimate medium of learning.

Classroom silence and the asymmetry of voices heard are thus not indicative of the absence of thinking but the lack of opportunity to be heard. Providing learners with purposeful silences and convivial spaces—time to process information, search for words, and rehearse ideas, in a language of their choice can make internal discourse (Hanh, 2020) visible.

Using Technology to Design for Discourse

Jose (2024) details how affordances of web-based tools can optimise discourse as a scaffolded, structured, inclusive, and reflective activity. Their asynchronicity offers temporal and spatial flexibility, allowing learners to participate at their own pace, with time to read, reflect, and compose ideas before responding. Hypertextual features enable teachers to share supplementary readings and model responses to support reasoning and scaffold production. Access to online resources and learner-generated content such as peer explanations, examples, and discussion posts, also benefit students with low topic familiarity or emerging linguistic competence.

Pedagogic affordances of anonymity and multimodality strengthen learners' confidence: students can respond through text, voice, image, or video depending on their cognitive preference. Equally important are the edit and delete functions, which allow learners to refine ideas, revise, and correct linguistic errors before posting publicly, reducing anxiety and promoting agency.

Using technology for discourse generation, however, is only the first step. Digital tools do not automatically create equity in participation. Fluent responses in English must not be mistaken for discourse and asking learners simply to 'post a comment' does not guarantee dialogue. To ensure learners' responses go beyond mere surface-level engagement, what is required is not the addition of technology, but a reorientation of pedagogy so that the affordances of technology can be deliberately optimised to ensure inclusion and dialogic engagement.

Critical Digital Pedagogy (CDP)

CDP begins from the premise that technologies are never neutral: they shape what is learned, decide whose voices are heard, and judge which knowledges can be legitimised (Ncube & Tawanda, 2025). Drawing on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), CDP argues that technology must be used intentionally and reflectively, with pedagogical choices guided by questions of voice, access, and justice. Using the lens of CDP encourages teachers to treat technology as a mediator of discourse, asking how digital environments can redistribute discourse opportunities especially in ESL contexts where linguistic hierarchies and English-dominant norms can silence learners (Morris & Stommel, 2018).

Designing for Discourse Using CDP

This article views discourse generation as a developmental process. Learners might develop confidence in collaborative discourse when initially scaffolded with structured opportunities and allowed gradual expansion of their agency. Digital tools can support this growth by providing varied and flexible pathways into participation.

The article proposes a continuum of three discourse-generation strategies:

- (1) Backchannelling that enables low-stakes, brief, often anonymous contributions,
- (2) Asynchronous discussions that support deeper reflection, collaborative reasoning, and iterative writing or speaking, and

- (3) AI-mediated translanguaging that mobilises learners' full linguistic repertoires, enabling multilingual contributions and new forms of collective authorship.

The article proposes that across this continuum, learners emerge from hesitant speakers/participants to confident co-constructors of knowledge.

A CDP lens guarantees design of tasks for equity, agency, and genuine dialogue without which tools risk becoming mere feedback boards or assignment repositories (Köseoglu, et. al., 2023). The following questions, drawn on Morris and Stommel's (2018) work, help shift attention from tool to task by asking not 'Which tool should I use?' but 'Whose participation will this task enable?'

1. Engagement: Does the task invite reasoning, interpretation, and synthesis rather than recall or agreement?
2. Agency: Whose voice does the task make possible, and whose might it overlook? Can multiple modes and languages be legitimised?
3. Learner roles: Does it allow learners to question and reshape ideas?
4. Teacher roles: How can the teacher act as a co-inquirer rather than an evaluator?

The subsequent sections operationalise these questions through the three discourse-generation strategies mentioned earlier.

Backchannelling

Digital backchannels are parallel communication spaces that run alongside synchronous instruction, allowing students to exchange brief, low-stakes messages while a class is in progress. Research shows that such channels encourage spontaneous, low-pressure contributions such as clarifications, comments, links, or emoji-like reactions (Tess, 2013). In higher education settings, platforms such as Twitter/X have been used as live backchannels during lectures and conferences, enabling participants to collectively interpret content in real time (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012). The use of Twitter as a classroom backchannel has been illustrated in early classroom experiments (Wright, 2009), where Rankin demonstrates how backchannels being synchronous, written, and offering degrees of anonymity, lower the affective, social, and linguistic pressure associated with speaking aloud.

These micro-discourses can be analysed using AI-powered note-taking systems to help teachers visualise participation and identify patterns of engagement by:

- extracting recurring themes and questions,
- clustering ideas to see how thinking evolves,
- highlighting misconceptions,
- surfacing conceptual gaps or missing perspectives, and
- tracing reasoning threads to identify dominant or overlooked ideas.

AI bots can evaluate discursive moves by:

- assessing their quality (clarification, convergent, divergent, metacognitive),
- evaluating reasoning depth (descriptive, interpretive, inferential, reflective),
- tracking iteration (whether learners build on peers' ideas or post isolated reactions), and
- flagging superficial reasoning that signal teacher modelling and scaffolding.

In non-anonymous backchannels, AI-generated participation maps can visualise engagement such as frequency, modes of contribution, and patterns of participation. The goal is to help teachers notice whether the task design privileges some learners over others. Such analytics enable further responsive instructional adjustments.

Asynchronous Discussions

Asynchronous discussions extend discourse beyond the temporal and spatial constraints of the classroom. Unlike synchronous exchanges, which tend to reward quick responses and fluent speaking, asynchronous environments support deep learning by allowing learners to read, reflect, compose, and revise before responding. Absence of pressure to respond immediately fosters higher-order cognitive activities such as interpretation, justification, application, and synthesis (Robbins & Fairbank, 2023). This shifts the cognitive demand from oral performance to thoughtful reasoning, transforming delay into a pedagogical resource (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012). For ESL learners, it reduces linguistic pressure and communicative anxiety.

A significant feature of asynchronous forums is the ‘text of talk’ (Black, 2005)—archived discussion threads of previous responses. Such threads can function as scaffolds for modelling, pivoting, or extending responses. This iterative and interdependent meaning-making where learners build on peers’ ideas rather than post in isolation, is a significant catalyser of classroom discourse (Dringus & Ellis, 2004). Asynchronous platforms also offer multimodal and multilingual contributions. These affordances lower linguistic barriers and legitimise diverse meaning-making resources, both critical in multilingual ESL settings.

As in the case of backchannelling, teachers can use AI to summarise long threads, identify emerging themes or conceptual gaps, visualise participation patterns, map networks of ideas, and use the insights to design follow-up actions.

AI-mediated Translanguaging

The third strategy for cultivating discourse-generation habits in ESL classrooms is the intentional use of translanguaging, where learners draw on their full linguistic repertoires rather than restricting participation to English alone. García and Wei (2014) describe translanguaging as the flexible mobilisation of all linguistic resources for meaning-making, communication, and learning. In multilingual classrooms, this reframes home languages not as deficits but as assets, and learners’ home-based knowledge as funds of knowledge. When legitimised within instruction, translanguaging enables fuller participation and counters the silencing effects of English-only norms.

Here, students are encouraged to compose ideas in the language that best captures their thinking and using AI, make those ideas accessible to peers in English. For example, students brainstorm or draft essay outlines in their home language, use AI to translate them to English, and then revise and collaboratively edit the output. Here, AI becomes a partner in communication by scaffolding and extending dialogue so learners can think in the language that best represents their ideas while still contributing meaningfully to a shared English-medium space. This is not a translation task but a dialogic process in which learners interact both with AI and peers negotiating how meaning travels across languages; AI scaffolds cross-linguistic dialogues without erasing linguistic identities. When the diversity of home languages is considered “as a strength rather than a source of conflict” (UNESCO, 2025, p. 54), multilingual posts get legitimised as epistemic contributions.

This strategy represents the most advanced stage in the discourse spectrum proposed in this paper. While backchannels support the emergence of voice and asynchronous discussions support sustained engagement and reflective reasoning; AI-mediated translanguaging encourages epistemic redesign by facilitating agentic discourse through linguistic choices. (See Appendix 1 for guidelines on facilitating digital discourse).

When integrated thoughtfully, the discourse-generation strategies discussed above contribute to participatory justice in two ways:

Pedagogically, they widen access to participation, allowing all learners to express thought and engage in collaborative discourse.

Ethically, they connect classroom communication to data justice: each multilingual post expands the presence of non-dominant languages in digital systems historically shaped by Global North corpora (Taylor, 2017), countering algorithmic bias and the epistemic erasure of non-dominant languages (Karpava et al., 2025).

Student Voice

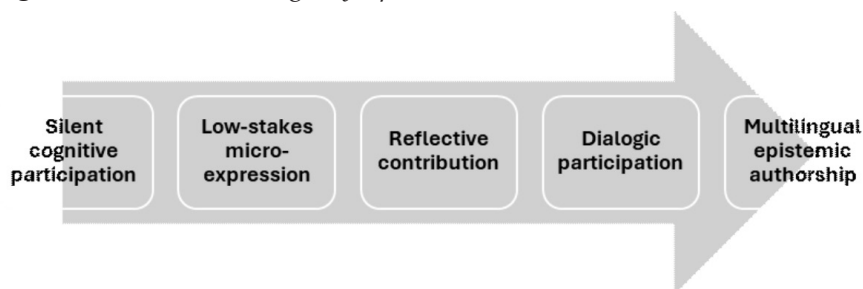
Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) conceptualise voice as a developmental spectrum moving from expression and consultation to participation, partnership, and finally activism and leadership. Originally intended to theorise youth engagement in educational reform, these writers were inspired to adapt it to capture the development of classroom discourse, where the focus is on how learners contribute to meaning-making within a classroom community of inquiry.

The Discursive Agency Spectrum proposed below suggests the gradual development of student voice from hesitant, anonymous expression to full discursive agency.

1. Silent cognitive participation: Internal translation, rehearsal, vocabulary search, perspective-building, active listening and thinking.
2. Low-stakes micro-expression: Emojis, brief reactions, impressions, clarifications, or questions.
3. Reflective contribution: Interpretation, justification, refining, and expansion of ideas.
4. Dialogic participation: Responding to peers, challenging assumptions, synthesising perspectives.

5. Multilingual epistemic authorship: Co-constructing knowledge using full linguistic and cultural repertoires.

Figure: *The Discursive Agency Spectrum*



Beyond Pedagogy: Data Justice

The implications of using these discourse-generation strategies extend beyond language learning outcomes. Use of home languages in a discourse-centric classroom not only amplifies learners' voices and strengthens their agency, it also produces data that enters the broader digital ecosystem. Because AI systems are trained predominantly on English and other Global North corpora, they reproduce systemic biases regarding knowledge that is recognised and valued (Taylor, 2017). Multilingual classroom discourse therefore becomes a form of data activism: each contribution adds to linguistic and epistemic diversity in digital spaces that have historically marginalised Global South voices.

This aligns with the principles of data justice (Taylor, 2017) that refer to fairness in how people are made visible, represented, and treated because of the digital data they produce. When classrooms generate multilingual artefacts such as posts, reflections, AI-mediated translations, etc. multilingual learners contribute discourse to systems historically shaped by dominant linguistic groups and reshape the linguistic terrain on which AI models learn. In this sense, a discourse-based CDP positions equitable classroom discourse as part of a broader struggle for linguistic and epistemic justice in an increasingly algorithmic world (Pangrazio et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This article argues that discourse must be understood as a fundamental goal of education. Cautioning that ESL classrooms often tend to silence

learners through teacher-centric practices, linguistic hierarchies, and narrow expectations of English fluency, it discusses CDP as a framework to rethink participation.

To illustrate how digital tools can be used deliberately to redistribute opportunities among learners to think aloud, be heard, and be contributors of knowledge, three discourse-generation strategies are outlined, viz., backchanneling, asynchronous discussions, and AI-mediated translanguaging. These strategies show how classrooms can be reshaped as spaces of equity, agency, and multilingual meaning-making. Backchannels operate at the threshold between silence and participation, enabling learners to move from listening to contributing through brief, low-stakes posts. Asynchronous forums help students move into deliberative and reflective participation, and reasoned contributions. And, at the highest stage, AI-mediated translanguaging enables learners to author newer epistemic trajectories shifting what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Together, these strategies form a developmental continuum through which students move across a voice/ discourse spectrum, viz., from expression, to participation, to multilingual authorship.

The implications extend beyond classroom pedagogy; from the ESL practitioners' perspective, to create the conditions for discourse is to create the conditions for student agency, linguistic and data justice.

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Appendix 1: Task design guidelines

These guidelines support the design of tasks across the three discourse-generation strategies proposed in this article: backchannelling, asynchronous discussion, and AI-mediated translanguaging. Each section identifies principles specific to that strategy. Some guidelines in this framework draw on best practices for asynchronous learning outlined in Varkey et al. (2023), modified here for discourse-generation task design.

A. Common guidelines (applicable across all three strategies)

1. State the purpose of each prompt so learners understand the goal of the activity. For example, linguistic justice (all languages are

equal); reply diversity (consider different perspectives); reflective responses (reflect before responding), etc.

2. Offer multimodal and multilingual flexibility. Allow responses through text, voice, image, or video, and any language that best captures their thinking.
3. Give opportunities for reasoning. Do not ask only for opinions or reactions; ask for explanation, justification, interpretation, or synthesis.
4. Assess evidence, engagement, reflection, and multilingual articulation, not the length of post, linguistic performance, or speed of posting.

B. Backchannel task design

5. Ensure safety. Use optional anonymity and low-stakes entry moves such as single words, emojis, or brief reactions.
6. Design for micro-expression. Invite brief and immediate responses. Do not require extended writing.
7. Examine backchannel data. Review contributions to identify questions, misconceptions, or overlooked perspectives. Use these to adjust instruction or to open discussion.

C. Asynchronous discussion task design

8. Give time for thinking. Use staggered deadlines so that learners can read and reflect before responding.
9. Allow revision before posting. Ask learners to edit and revise their contributions before sharing.
10. Build interdependence. Invite learners to question, extend, link, or summarise peer responses.
11. Require reply diversity. Ask learners to respond to someone whose interpretation differs from their own.
12. Model discourse moves. The teacher posts a response to demonstrate what linking, synthesising, questioning, or revising thinking looks like in practice.
13. Assign rotating discourse roles. To scaffold participation and diversify contributions, roles can be assigned. Some examples are:
Questioner: *Ask a peer for additional information to make a point clearer.*
Clarifier: *Identify ambiguity in a peer's response and ask for precision.*

Synthesiser: Identify a shared insight across three or more peers' responses.

Connector: Link a peer's idea to a real-world experience, event, or another subject.

Challenger: Respectfully disagree with a peer's interpretation and offer a reason.

14. Provide reflective spaces. At the end of the task, ask learners to return to their initial post to identify how their responses changed.

D. AI-mediated translanguaging task design

15. Legitimise use of home languages. Explicitly invite learners to draft, brainstorm, or reason in the language that best captures their ideas before translating to the shared language.
16. Frame AI as a dialogic partner, not a translation machine. Help learners revise, question, and annotate AI output critically.
17. Ask learners to make their linguistic choices visible. Include a prompt that asks why a particular language, or a word or phrase in another language was chosen, and what was gained or lost in translation.
18. Invite metadiscursive and metalinguistic reflection. At a later stage, ask learners to reflect on how interaction and reflection shaped their thinking.

Sample reflection prompts:

Did time given to think help shape your responses? What did you revise before posting?

How did interacting with peers change your understanding/ interpretation of...?

How did interacting with AI affect your thinking?

Which language helped you express your ideas most precisely, and why?

What was difficult to translate?

Who helped you refine your understanding more—peer or AI?

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