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Enhancing Oral Argumentation and Speaking Skills through Critical Thinking-Based Instruction: A Pedagogical Framework for Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to examine how critical thinking-based instruction can enhance oral argumentation and overall speaking proficiency among intermediate learners in Iranian EFL classrooms, where speaking instruction often prioritizes linguistic accuracy and fluency while neglecting the development of argumentation skills.

Methods: This article adopts a conceptual and analytical approach grounded in existing scholarship on communicative language teaching, argumentation theory, and critical thinking, drawing on the works of Toulmin (2003), Kuhn (1991), Facione (1990), and Richards (2008). It reviews the theoretical connections between critical thinking and oral argumentation and analyzes the pedagogical characteristics and challenges of the Iranian EFL context. Based on this analysis, a practical pedagogical framework is proposed, built on four key principles: scaffolding, interaction, reasoning, and reflection. The framework is accompanied by suggested classroom activities and assessment strategies for developing oral argumentation skills.

Results: The analysis indicates that incorporating critical thinking into speaking instruction can significantly support the development of learners' oral argumentation skills, including the ability to justify opinions, provide evidence for claims, and respond to opposing viewpoints. The proposed framework demonstrates how structured instructional practices can foster greater coherence, organization, and persuasiveness in learners' spoken discourse.

Conclusions: Integrating critical thinking into speaking instruction offers strong potential for improving not only learners' fluency but also the logical depth and effectiveness of their oral communication. The study highlights the pedagogical value of combining critical thinking with speaking activities in the Iranian EFL context and provides practical implications for teachers as well as directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching (Richards, 2008). Unlike reading or listening, speaking requires immediate language production under real-time processing constraints; learners must retrieve vocabulary, organize ideas, apply grammatical knowledge, monitor pronunciation, and maintain interaction simultaneously (Bachman, 1990; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). For this reason, speaking instruction occupies a central place in communicative language teaching (Widdowson, 1978; Canale & Swain, 1980). However, not all speaking tasks develop the same dimensions of oral proficiency. While many classroom activities improve pronunciation, turn-taking, or short-answer fluency, they may not prepare learners to express, defend, and negotiate viewpoints in more cognitively demanding situations.

One area that deserves greater attention is oral argumentation. Oral argumentation refers to the ability to present a claim, support it with reasons and evidence, consider alternative perspectives, and respond to disagreement in spoken interaction (Toulmin, 2003; Kuhn, 1991; Walton, 2006). This ability is essential not only for academic communication but also for social participation, decision-making, and professional interaction (Mercer, 2000; Rapanta, García-Mila, & Gilabert, 2021). In real-life settings, language users are frequently expected to do more than exchange simple information; they must justify choices, persuade others, explain causes, evaluate evidence, and challenge assumptions (Osborne, 2020). Yet in many EFL classrooms, especially in form-focused contexts, students receive limited practice in these higher-level discourse functions (Li, 2020; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023).

The Iranian EFL context illustrates this issue clearly. A considerable number of Iranian learners spend years studying English, often developing substantial knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). Nevertheless, many continue to face difficulty in extended spoken interaction, particularly when they are asked to express opinions in a coherent and persuasive manner (Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2022). This problem is especially noticeable among intermediate learners. At this level, students generally possess sufficient language resources to participate in basic conversation, but they may not yet have developed the cognitive-discursive strategies needed for argumentation. They may state an opinion

but struggle to support it; they may speak fluently in routine exchanges but hesitate when required to justify a position or address an opposing idea (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2020; Swain, 2000). A promising response to this challenge is critical thinking-based instruction. Critical thinking has been widely associated with skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011). In language education, it is increasingly viewed as an essential component of meaningful communication rather than an optional add-on (Brookfield, 2012; Abrami et al., 2008). If learners are trained to question assumptions, assess reasons, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives, their spoken discourse is likely to become more organized, purposeful, and persuasive (McPeck, 1981; Norris & Ennis, 1989; Manalo et al., 2021). Critical thinking provides the conceptual structure that argumentative speaking requires (Teng, 2022).

This paper proposes a theoretically grounded framework through which critical thinking-based instruction may support the development of oral argumentation and speaking skills in the Iranian intermediate EFL context. It does so through a review of relevant scholarship and the proposal of a pedagogical framework suitable for classroom application. The central claim of the paper is that speaking pedagogy should move beyond form-focused oral production and create opportunities for reasoning-rich interaction in which learners use English to think, explain, defend, and negotiate ideas.

2. Speaking as a Multidimensional Construct

Speaking is a complex skill that integrates linguistic knowledge, discourse management, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and strategic competence (Bachman, 1990; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Communicative competence models have long emphasized that successful language use requires more than grammatical mastery; it also involves knowing how to use language appropriately in context and how to maintain communication when difficulties arise (Canale & Swain, 1980). Similarly, Bachman (1990) describes language ability as a combination of organizational and pragmatic knowledge, both of which are essential for effective oral communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, speaking involves fluency, accuracy, interactional management, and the ability to produce meaningful discourse (Richards, 2008). Learners need opportunities to speak for different purposes, such as describing, narrating, explaining, persuading, and arguing

(Widdowson, 1978). These purposes vary in cognitive and communicative demand. For example, giving a simple description may require limited reasoning, whereas defending an opinion in discussion requires the speaker to select evidence, structure ideas logically, and respond to alternative viewpoints (Toulmin, 2003; Kuhn, 1991). Such reasoning-rich speaking tasks are central to communicative language teaching and align with task-based approaches (Teng, 2022). This broader view of speaking is especially important at the intermediate level (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). Intermediate learners often possess enough vocabulary and grammar to participate in basic communication, yet they may still struggle to elaborate ideas, maintain extended turns, or express nuanced positions (Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2022). Their speaking development therefore depends not only on linguistic input and practice but also on tasks that stimulate reasoning and interaction (Swain, 2000; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023). Table 1 summarizes selected foundational studies that support the view of speaking as a linguistic, communicative, and cognitive skill.

Table 1. Selected Foundational Studies on Speaking, Critical Thinking, and Oral Argumentation

| Source | Main Focus | Key Contribution | Relevance to the Present Article |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Bachman (1990) | Communicative language ability | Defines language ability as organizational and pragmatic competence | Supports the multidimensional view of speaking |
| Canale and Swain (1980) | Communicative competence | Emphasize grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence | Shows that speaking requires more than grammar |
| Richards (2008) | Teaching speaking | Highlights fluency, interaction, and discourse management | Supports pedagogical treatment of speaking |
| Facione (1990) | Critical thinking | Identifies core critical thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation | Connects cognitive processes to oral performance |
| Ennis (2011) | Critical thinking | Defines critical thinking as reasonable reflective thinking | Supports the integration of reasoning into speaking instruction |
| Kuhn (1991) | Argument skills | Explains how argument develops through reasoned justification | Links speaking to argumentation and evidence |
| Toulmin (2003) | Structure of argument | Provides a model of claims, data, and warrants | Useful for teaching oral argument structure |
| Walton (2006) | Critical argumentation | Examines how arguments are evaluated in dialogue | Supports dialogic oral interaction |

3. Oral Argumentation in EFL Learning

Oral argumentation is a form of spoken discourse in which a speaker or group of speakers advances a claim and supports it through reasons, evidence, and responses to competing viewpoints (Toulmin, 2003; Kuhn, 1991). It may occur in debates, discussions, problem-solving tasks,

interviews, negotiations, or classroom conversations (Walton, 2006; Osborne, 2020). In educational contexts, oral argumentation plays a major role in developing learners' academic language and interactive competence (Rapanta, García-Mila, & Gilabert, 2021; Mercer, 2000).

Argumentation is not the same as disagreement. It is a structured and reasoned form of communication (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2020). A well-developed oral argument usually contains several components:

- A claim or position,
- One or more reasons supporting the claim,
- Evidence or examples illustrating those reasons,
- Acknowledgment of a counterclaim or alternative perspective,
- A rebuttal explaining why the original position remains stronger.

These elements can appear in varying degrees depending on the proficiency level and task type (Kuhn, 1991). For intermediate EFL learners, even simple versions of this structure can significantly enrich spoken production (Swain, 2000; Teng, 2022).

The educational value of oral argumentation is substantial. First, it encourages learners to move beyond personal preference toward reasoned explanation (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011). Instead of saying, "I like online learning," learners are pushed to explain why, under what conditions, and with what evidence (Osborne, 2020). Second, oral argumentation promotes interactional engagement. Learners must listen carefully, compare ideas, and respond strategically (Mercer, 2000). Third, it helps develop academic speaking abilities that are essential in higher education and international communication (Rapanta, García-Mila, & Gilabert, 2021).

Despite these benefits, oral argumentation is often neglected in EFL classrooms (Li, 2020; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023). One reason is that many speaking activities are designed for language practice rather than idea development (Richards, 2008). Another reason is that argumentation requires both cognitive and linguistic support (Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2022). Learners need not only the language of opinion and contrast but also the ability to reason, evaluate, and organize discourse (Manalo et al., 2021). Without instruction in these areas, they may produce speech that is grammatically acceptable but conceptually weak (McPeck, 1981).

4. Critical Thinking and Language Education

Critical thinking is a broad and sometimes contested concept, but it generally refers to disciplined and reflective thinking directed toward deciding what to believe or do (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011). It includes skills such as identifying assumptions, analyzing arguments, evaluating evidence, drawing inferences, recognizing bias, and reflecting on one's own reasoning process (McPeck, 1981; Norris & Ennis, 1989). In education, critical thinking is widely seen as a key objective because it enables learners to engage actively with knowledge rather than receive it passively (Brookfield, 2012; Abrami et al., 2008).

In language education, critical thinking has gained increasing importance because communication is not simply about form; it is also about meaning, judgment, and purpose (Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023; Canale & Swain, 1980). When learners use language to compare perspectives, solve problems, evaluate claims, or support opinions, they engage in cognitively meaningful communication (Widdowson, 1978; Richards, 2008). This type of activity aligns closely with communicative and task-based approaches to language teaching, which emphasize purposeful language use over isolated practice (Canale & Swain, 1980; Teng, 2022).

Critical thinking contributes to language learning in several ways (Abrami et al., 2008). First, it gives learners a reason to communicate. Instead of producing language only to satisfy teacher instructions, learners speak because they want to express a view, challenge an idea, or defend a conclusion (Manalo et al., 2021). Second, it promotes deeper processing of content. When students evaluate evidence or weigh alternatives, they are likely to use language more meaningfully and remember it more effectively (Teng, 2022; Swain, 2000). Third, it supports learner autonomy by helping students monitor and revise their own ideas and language use (Facione, 1990; Brookfield, 2012).

The integration of critical thinking into EFL instruction does not mean turning every classroom into a philosophy seminar (Ennis, 2011). Rather, it means designing activities in which learners are encouraged to ask questions, justify opinions, examine alternatives, and think more carefully about what they say (Brookfield, 2012). In speaking classes, this can lead to richer oral production and greater communicative authenticity (Richards, 2008; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023).

5. The Link between Critical Thinking and Oral Argumentation

The relationship between critical thinking and oral argumentation is strong and direct. Oral argumentation requires learners to formulate claims, judge the relevance of evidence, consider counter positions, and present ideas coherently (Toulmin, 2003; Walton, 2006). These are also central dimensions of critical thinking (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011). In other words, argumentation can be viewed as one of the most visible expressions of critical thinking in spoken language (Kuhn, 1991; Rapanta et al., 2021).

This connection has important implications for speaking instruction (Richards, 2008). If learners are taught how to analyze issues, organize reasoning, and evaluate alternative positions, they may become better able to participate in extended oral interaction (Abrami et al., 2008; Brookfield, 2012). Likewise, if they are given opportunities to engage in structured speaking tasks that require justification and rebuttal, they may strengthen both their language ability and their thinking skills (Swain, 2000; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023; Teng, 2022). Such integration of critical thinking into speaking pedagogy aligns with the goals of communicative competence, where meaningful, purposeful discourse is prioritized over mechanical language practice (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990).

Table 2. Proposed Critical Thinking-Based Instructional Framework for Oral Argumentation Development

| Component | Description | Classroom Goal | Example Activity |
|-------------|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Scaffolding | Guided support for reasoning and speaking | Build confidence | Sentence stems |
| Interaction | Peer discussion and exchange | Improve fluency and negotiation | Pair debate |
| Reasoning | Claim-evidence-justification structure | Strengthen argument | Evidence-ranking task |
| Reflection | Self/peer evaluation | Develop awareness | Speaking journal |

This framework suggests that effective instruction should integrate multiple dimensions of learning. Scaffolding helps learners build confidence and structure their thoughts. Interaction provides opportunities for real-time communication and negotiation of meaning. Reasoning supports the development of logical argumentation. Reflection encourages metacognition and self-assessment.

6. The Role of Critical Thinking in Enhancing Speaking Proficiency

Critical thinking serves as a foundational cognitive capacity that directly supports and enhances speaking proficiency, particularly in tasks requiring argumentation and extended discourse (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011). Its integration into speaking instruction addresses several key

limitations often observed in intermediate EFL learners, transforming superficial or hesitant speech into coherent, substantive, and interactive communication.

6.1. Organizing content

Many speaking difficulties stem not from purely linguistic deficits but from conceptual and organizational challenges (Widdowson, 1978). Learners often hesitate or produce fragmented speech because they are unsure *what* to say or *how* to structure their ideas logically (Richards, 2008). Critical thinking provides a mental framework for content generation and organization by guiding learners to identify a central claim, gather supporting reasons and evidence, anticipate counterarguments, and sequence their points coherently (Toulmin, 2003; Kuhn, 1991). This structured approach to thinking reduces cognitive load during real-time speech production, resulting in more fluent and organized oral output (Swain, 2000; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023).

6.2. Deepening discourse

Without the deliberate engagement of critical thinking, oral responses often remain superficial, limited to simple statements of preference or fact without elaboration or justification (Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2022). Critical thinking-based instruction pushes learners beyond mere opinion-stating by encouraging them to explain causes, compare alternatives, evaluate consequences, and justify their conclusions with reasoning (Facione, 1990; Brookfield, 2012). This process enriches discourse, transforming brief utterances into analytically substantive speech that demonstrates higher-order cognitive engagement (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2021).

6.3. Improving responsiveness

Argumentative speaking is inherently interactive and dialogic; it requires speakers to listen actively, critically evaluate others' positions, and respond thoughtfully rather than merely reiterating prepared lines (Walton, 2006; Mercer, 2000). Critical thinking cultivates this responsiveness by training learners to consider multiple perspectives, identify weaknesses in arguments, and adapt their own claims in light of new information (Ennis, 2011; Osborne, 2020). This leads to more authentic, dynamic interaction and moves learners away from monologic speaking toward genuine dialogue, a key component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990).

6.4. Supporting confidence and autonomy

Psychological and affective factors significantly influence speaking performance. Learners often experience anxiety or hesitation when faced with open-ended speaking tasks because they lack a clear cognitive strategy (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). Critical thinking provides a reliable framework—such as the use of claim-reason-evidence-rebuttal structures—that reduces uncertainty and builds procedural confidence (Toulmin, 2003; Teng, 2022). When students know *how* to construct an argument and what types of support to use, they are less likely to panic during speaking activities. Over time, this structured approach fosters greater learner autonomy, as individuals internalize these thinking strategies and apply them independently in new communicative contexts (Swain, 2000; Manalo et al., 2021). Thus, critical thinking is not an isolated skill separate from speaking proficiency; rather, it is one of the underlying cognitive capacities that make higher-level, persuasive, and coherent oral communication possible (Abrami et al., 2008; Li, 2020). By integrating critical thinking into speaking instruction, educators can address the multidimensional nature of spoken language ability, bridging the gap between linguistic knowledge and effective communicative performance (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019; Richards, 2008).

7. The Iranian Intermediate EFL Context

The Iranian EFL context presents particular conditions that make critical thinking-based speaking instruction both valuable and challenging. Empirical studies conducted in Iran have consistently shown that EFL learners, despite years of formal instruction, demonstrate limited oral argumentation ability in classroom settings (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022; Farahian & Rezaee, 2012). Research further indicates that Iranian EFL classrooms are predominantly teacher-centered, with instruction heavily oriented toward grammar, translation, and exam preparation rather than communicative or reasoning-based tasks (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). English is widely learned for academic advancement, international communication, and employment opportunities. Many students are highly motivated and invest considerable time in language learning. However, classroom practices have often been shaped by examination pressures, textbook-driven instruction, and a strong focus on grammar and reading.

In such environments, speaking may receive less systematic attention, and when it is taught, it may be limited to controlled or low-risk activities. Students may practice dialogues, answer comprehension questions orally, or deliver short presentations, but they may receive little training

in extended reasoning and argumentation. As a result, they can often produce correct language at the sentence level without being able to sustain a persuasive discussion.

Intermediate learners are a particularly important group in this context. They are no longer beginners and therefore can engage with more complex ideas, but they still need substantial support. They often possess enough vocabulary and grammar to express basic opinions, yet they may lack:

- argumentative discourse markers,
- confidence in interactive speaking,
- strategies for supporting claims,
- experience with counterargument and rebuttal,
- familiarity with open-ended classroom discussion.

Cultural and institutional factors may also play a role. In some classrooms, students may be accustomed to teacher authority and may hesitate to challenge views openly. In addition, if assessment systems reward memorization or formal accuracy more than communicative reasoning, teachers may feel little incentive to devote time to argumentation-based tasks. For this reason, the successful integration of critical thinking into Iranian EFL speaking classes requires context-sensitive adaptation rather than simple adoption of imported methods.

8. Why Critical Thinking-Based Instruction Is Needed

The need for critical thinking-based instruction in the Iranian intermediate EFL context can be explained through pedagogical, linguistic, and educational rationales (Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2022; Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). Each perspective highlights a distinct gap in traditional speaking instruction and illustrates how integrating critical thinking can lead to more comprehensive language development.

From a pedagogical perspective, conventional speaking activities—such as scripted role-plays, controlled question-answer drills, or memorized dialogues—often fail to create sufficient cognitive engagement or communicative demand (Richards, 2008; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Learners may complete these tasks mechanically without genuinely reasoning, analyzing, or justifying their ideas in English (Widdowson, 1978). Critical thinking-based tasks, by contrast, require learners to evaluate information, weigh alternatives, and construct reasoned positions, thereby raising the level of cognitive involvement and promoting more meaningful, purposeful

language use (Facione, 1990; Swain, 2000). This shift aligns with communicative language teaching principles that emphasize authentic, content-driven interaction over mere form practice (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990).

From a linguistic perspective, argumentative speaking pushes learners to employ a wider range of language functions essential for advanced communication (Toulmin, 2003; Walton, 2006). These include expressing stance, providing reasons, making comparisons, conceding points, rebutting opposing claims, and qualifying statements (Kuhn, 1991; Teng, 2022). Engaging in such functions expands learners' spoken repertoire beyond basic description and narration, fostering the use of complex syntax, discourse connectors, and pragmatic markers that are characteristic of proficient spoken discourse (Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023; Li, 2020). As a result, learners develop not only fluency but also the linguistic flexibility needed for persuasive and coherent oral expression (Richards, 2008).

From an educational perspective, language classrooms should contribute to learners' broader intellectual and personal development, preparing them for academic, professional, and civic participation (Brookfield, 2012; Abrami et al., 2008). Speaking classes that incorporate critical thinking help learners become not only more effective speakers but also more reflective, analytical, and autonomous communicators (Ennis, 2011; Manalo et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in academic settings where students will later need to engage in seminars, presentations, interviews, and discussions that require reasoned oral expression and the ability to negotiate meaning (Osborne, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2021). In an era of globalized communication, the capacity to articulate well-founded arguments in English is a valuable educational outcome that transcends narrow linguistic objectives (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2020).

Therefore, critical thinking-based instruction should not be viewed as an extra burden added to speaking teaching. Instead, it should be seen as a way of making speaking instruction more complete, relevant, and aligned with the cognitive and communicative demands of real-world interaction (McPeck, 1981; Norris & Ennis, 1989). By embedding critical thinking into speaking pedagogy, educators can address the multidimensional nature of language proficiency and better prepare intermediate EFL learners for the challenges of extended, reasoned discourse in both academic and social contexts (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Teng, 2022).

9. A Pedagogical Framework for Critical Thinking-Based Speaking Instruction

Drawing on Toulmin's (2003) model of argumentation, Swain's (2000) output hypothesis, and Brookfield's (2012) framework for critical thinking in education, the present paper proposes a pedagogical framework for integrating critical thinking into intermediate EFL speaking classes. This synthesized framework is built around four core principles: scaffolding, interaction, reasoning, and reflection. While this framework has not yet been empirically validated, it is grounded in established theoretical perspectives and is intended as a basis for future classroom-based research. This framework provides a structured yet flexible approach to designing speaking tasks that simultaneously develop linguistic proficiency and cognitive skills.

9.1. Scaffolding

Intermediate learners require explicit instructional support to engage successfully in oral argumentation, as they may lack both the linguistic resources and the cognitive strategies needed for such tasks (Swain, 2000; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023). Effective scaffolding can include providing models of simple spoken arguments, useful lexical phrases for expressing claims, support, contrast, and rebuttal, graphic organizers for idea planning, and annotated examples of strong versus weak reasoning (Toulmin, 2003; Kuhn, 1991). For instance, learners can be taught formulaic but flexible expressions such as: "I believe that...", "The main reason is...", "For example...", "Some people may say..., but...", and "This evidence suggests that..." (Richards, 2008; Li, 2020). These linguistic scaffolds help learners bridge the gap between internal reasoning and external speech, reducing anxiety and increasing fluency (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019).

9.2. Interaction

Critical thinking develops not in isolation but through social exchange and dialogic engagement (Mercer, 2000; Walton, 2006). Learners need structured opportunities to compare ideas, challenge assumptions, and negotiate meaning with peers in pair or group settings (Osborne, 2020). However, without clear guidelines, such interactions may devolve into silence, repetition, or off-task talk (Rapanta et al., 2021). To prevent this, teachers can design tasks with defined roles (e.g., proponent, skeptic, moderator), time limits, and specific communicative goals (e.g., "reach a consensus," "identify the strongest argument"). This structured interaction ensures that discussion remains focused and cognitively demanding, fostering both language use and collaborative reasoning (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2020).

9.3. Reasoning

Speaking tasks must be designed to require genuine thinking, not merely the production of pre-learned phrases (Widdowson, 1978). Topics should be open-ended enough to allow for multiple perspectives and genuine debate, yet accessible and relevant to intermediate learners' linguistic and experiential backgrounds (Brookfield, 2012). Before engaging in oral production, students can benefit from a brief but focused planning phase in which they outline key elements of their argument: one clear position, two supporting reasons, one concrete example, one possible counterargument, and one prepared rebuttal (Facione, 1990; Ennis, 2011). This structured reasoning stage not only improves the logical coherence and depth of the subsequent speech but also boosts learners' confidence by providing a clear mental roadmap for the speaking task (Manalo et al., 2021; Abrami et al., 2008).

9.4. Reflection

The fourth principle, reflection, completes the learning cycle by encouraging learners to critically evaluate their own and others' reasoning processes (Facione, 1990; Brookfield, 2012). After a speaking activity, students can be guided to consider questions such as: "Was my evidence convincing?", "How did I respond to counterarguments?", or "What could I have done to make my position clearer?" (Swain, 2000). This metacognitive practice promotes learner autonomy and helps internalize critical thinking as a reusable strategy for future communication (Teng, 2022). Incorporating reflection—through brief written journals, group discussions, or teacher-led debriefings—ensures that speaking practice leads to lasting cognitive and linguistic development (Derakhshan et al., 2022). By systematically applying these four principles—scaffolding, interaction, reasoning, and reflection—teachers can create a classroom environment where speaking instruction goes beyond linguistic form to foster the reasoned, reflective, and interactive discourse that characterizes proficient communication in academic and real-world contexts (Richards, 2008; Canale & Swain, 1980).

10. Suggested Classroom Activities

10.1. Structured debate

A structured debate is one of the most direct ways to develop oral argumentation. Students are assigned positions on an issue and asked to prepare short arguments. The teacher provides a clear sequence:

1. opening statement,
2. supporting reasons,
3. response to opposition,
4. final summary.

This format helps learners internalize argumentative organization while also practicing fluency and interaction.

10.2. Problem-solving discussion

Groups of students work together to discuss practical, real-world issues such as student stress, environmental problems, or the effects of technology on daily life. Each group must first identify the causes and scope of the problem, then brainstorm possible solutions, and finally evaluate the pros and cons of each option. After discussing, they must agree on the best solution and prepare a short oral presentation to defend their choice. This task requires reasoning, comparison, and collaborative speaking, as students must negotiate meaning, listen to differing opinions, and build on each other's ideas. It also encourages critical thinking because they must justify why one solution is more effective than others based on criteria such as feasibility, cost, or impact. Ultimately, this activity helps learners develop the ability to express complex ideas and respond to counterarguments in a supportive group setting.

10.3. Evidence-ranking activity

In this activity, students are given several pieces of evidence, examples, or pieces of information related to a specific topic. Their task is to rank these items according to how strongly they support a given claim or position. For example, if the claim is "social media has a negative effect on teenagers," students might rank statistics, expert opinions, personal anecdotes, or survey results from strongest to weakest evidence. After ranking individually or in pairs, they must explain and defend their ranking orally, either in small groups or to the whole class. This activity strengthens evaluation skills because students must analyze each piece of evidence for relevance, reliability, and logical connection to the claim. It also builds argumentative vocabulary, as students learn to use phrases like "strongly supports," "weakly supports," "contradicts," or "is irrelevant." Furthermore, hearing others' rankings exposes students to different perspectives and encourages them to reconsider their own reasoning.

10.4. Role-play with conflicting perspectives

In this activity, learners adopt different social roles and discuss an issue from assigned, often conflicting, perspectives. For instance, one student may act as a teacher, another as a parent, and another as a student when discussing school policies such as dress codes, homework limits, or cellphone bans. Each student must understand their role's viewpoint, anticipate the arguments of others, and respond accordingly during the discussion. This encourages perspective-taking, empathy, and flexible thinking, as students must step outside their own opinions to argue convincingly from another point of view. The dynamic nature of role-play also makes speaking more engaging and less predictable, which simulates real-life conversations where we do not control what others say. Teachers can increase complexity by adding new information mid-discussion or having observers provide feedback on how well each participant maintained their role. This activity not only improves oral fluency but also deepens learners' understanding of complex social issues.

10.5. Socratic questioning

The teacher facilitates a discussion by asking open-ended questions such as:

- Why do you think that?
- What evidence supports your idea?
- Is there another possible explanation?
- What would someone who disagrees say?

These questions deepen learners' reasoning and prevent superficial responses.

10.6. Reflective speaking journal

After oral tasks, students record short spoken reflections on what they argued, what problems they faced, and how they might improve next time. This connects speaking practice to metacognitive growth.

Table 3. Sample Classroom Activities for Developing Oral Argumentation and Speaking

| Activity | Skill Focus | Critical Thinking Focus | Expected Outcome |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Structured debate | Fluency, accuracy, persuasion | Evaluation of claims | Stronger oral defense |
| Problem-solving discussion | Collaborative speaking | Solution generation | Improved communicative flexibility |
| Evidence-ranking activity | Extended speaking | Evaluation of evidence | Better reasoning and justification |
| Role-play with conflicting perspectives | Interactive speaking | Perspective-taking | More nuanced communication |
| Socratic questioning | Extended speaking | Analysis and justification | Deeper reasoning |
| Reflective speaking journal | Self-assessment | Metacognition | Increased awareness and improvement |

These activities provide structured opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful communication while developing their critical thinking and argumentation skills.

11. Assessment Considerations

If teachers want students to develop oral argumentation, assessment must value it. A speaking rubric limited to pronunciation and grammar will not encourage students to build thoughtful arguments. Instead, assessment should include both linguistic and reasoning-related dimensions.

A balanced oral assessment rubric may contain:

- **Fluency:** smoothness and continuity of speech
- **Accuracy:** grammatical and lexical control
- **Coherence:** logical sequencing and use of connectors
- **Argument quality:** clarity of position and relevance of supporting reasons
- **Use of evidence/examples:** effectiveness of illustration and support
- **Responsiveness:** ability to address counterarguments or partner contributions
- **Critical engagement:** depth of analysis and consideration of alternatives

Peer assessment and self-assessment can also be useful, especially when learners are trained to notice qualities of effective argumentation. Such practices increase awareness and make critical thinking more visible in the classroom.

Table 4. Assessment Rubric for Oral Argumentation and Speaking

| Criterion | Excellent | Good | Developing | Needs Improvement |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Fluency | Speaks smoothly | Minor hesitation | Frequent pauses | Very limited flow |
| Coherence | Ideas are well-organized | Mostly clear | Some disorganization | Ideas are unclear |
| Argument quality | Clear claim + strong evidence | Mostly clear reasoning | Weak support | No clear argument |
| Critical thinking | Evaluates and defends ideas well | Some evaluation | Limited analysis | Mostly descriptive |

This rubric can be used for both formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment allows learners to receive feedback and improve over time, while summative assessment provides a final evaluation of speaking performance. In addition to rubrics, self-assessment and peer assessment can be valuable tools for promoting learner autonomy and reflection. Learners can use checklists or reflective prompts to evaluate their own speaking performance and provide feedback to peers. This process encourages learners to become more aware of their strengths and areas for improvement.

12. Challenges and Limitations of Implementation

Although the benefits of critical thinking-based instruction are substantial, implementation may face several obstacles (Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2022; Manalo et al., 2021). These challenges span teacher readiness, learner dispositions, linguistic constraints, curricular pressures, and institutional assessment systems. Addressing them requires careful planning and systemic support.

12.1. Teacher readiness

A primary obstacle is teacher readiness. Many instructors in EFL contexts may not have received formal training in critical thinking pedagogy or oral argumentation (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). They may be uncertain about how to teach argumentation, manage open-ended discussions, or assess reasoning fairly (Brookfield, 2012). Without adequate preparation, teachers might revert to familiar, form-focused methods even when aiming to foster higher-order thinking (Richards, 2008). Therefore, sustained professional development—including workshops, collaborative lesson design, and classroom mentoring—is crucial for building pedagogical confidence and competence (Abrami et al., 2008; Jiang, Zhang, & May, 2023).

12.2. Learner hesitation

Students accustomed to teacher-led, transmission-style classrooms may initially feel uncomfortable expressing disagreement or exploring controversial issues (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2020). This hesitation can stem from cultural norms, fear of making mistakes, or lack of experience with dialogic learning (Derakhshan et al., 2022). To reduce this challenge, instructors should deliberately create a respectful, low-anxiety classroom climate where diverse viewpoints are welcomed and errors are treated as part of the learning process (Swain, 2000). Starting with

manageable, non-threatening topics and structured speaking frames can help learners gradually build confidence in argumentative discourse (Toulmin, 2003; Walton, 2006).

12.3. Language limitations

Intermediate learners often possess ideas they cannot yet express fully in English, which can create a gap between cognitive intent and linguistic output (Li, 2020). When tasked with complex argumentation, they may struggle with vocabulary for expressing causality, contrast, evidence, and qualification (Teng, 2022). Teachers should therefore provide targeted linguistic support, such as argument-specific lexical phrases, sentence starters, discourse markers, and planning time before speaking tasks (Richards, 2008). The goal is to balance cognitive challenge with appropriate scaffolding so that language limitations do not stifle reasoning opportunities (Swain, 2000; Jiang et al., 2023).

12.4. Time pressure

Critical thinking-based speaking tasks—such as debates, problem-solving discussions, or evidence-based presentations—often require more instructional time than controlled drills or memorized dialogues (Osborne, 2020). In tightly scheduled curricula oriented toward exam preparation, teachers may struggle to allocate sufficient time for extended oral reasoning activities (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). However, even short, well-designed tasks (e.g., a 10-minute “mini-debate” or a structured pair discussion) can foster critical engagement if used consistently and integrated with other language work (Rapanta et al., 2021). Curriculum designers and program administrators may need to reconsider time allocation to create space for deeper speaking practice (Manalo et al., 2021).

12.5. Institutional assessment

If institutional exams and standardized assessments focus mainly on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary recall, or formulaic speaking, teachers may feel pressured to prioritize those areas over reasoning and argumentation (McPeck, 1981; Norris & Ennis, 1989). This misalignment between pedagogical goals and evaluation criteria can undermine the implementation of critical thinking-based instruction (Facione, 1990). For such pedagogy to thrive, assessment practices must also evolve to include criteria such as coherence of argument, use of evidence, responsiveness to counterpoints, and logical organization (Ennis, 2011; Brookfield, 2012). Rubrics that value content

and reasoning alongside linguistic form can help signal to both teachers and learners that thoughtful communication is a central objective (Abrami et al., 2008; Teng, 2022).

13. Implications for EFL Teaching in Iran

The implications of this approach are important for teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers. For teachers, the main implication is that speaking instruction should include tasks that require learners to justify, compare, and evaluate ideas. Teachers do not need to change everything at once. Even adding one structured argumentation task per week can enrich classroom discourse. For curriculum designers, the implication is that speaking materials should move beyond simple opinion questions and include more issue-based, evidence-based, and interactive tasks. Textbooks can provide models of spoken argumentation and step-by-step support for intermediate learners. For teacher educators, it is important to prepare instructors to use questioning techniques, facilitate discussion, and assess oral reasoning. Without such support, critical thinking may remain a theoretical ideal rather than a classroom reality. For researchers, there is a need for more empirical work in the Iranian context. Future studies can examine how critical thinking-based instruction affects fluency, coherence, lexical variety, argument quality, and learner confidence. Researchers can also explore student attitudes toward argumentative speaking and the role of teacher feedback in shaping oral reasoning.

14. Conclusion

The present study has argued that critical thinking-based instruction offers a valuable and necessary direction for improving oral argumentation and speaking skills in the Iranian intermediate EFL context. Speaking ability should not be reduced to pronunciation, grammar, or short conversational exchange. In many real-world contexts, effective speaking requires learners to defend opinions, support claims, evaluate alternatives, and respond to others in a coherent and persuasive manner. These are precisely the abilities that critical thinking can help develop. By integrating critical thinking into speaking classes, teachers can create richer communicative environments in which students use English not only to produce language but also to reason through ideas. Based on the theoretical framework proposed in this paper and supported by existing literature, such an approach has strong potential to improve coherence, fluency, responsiveness, and argumentative depth, a claim that warrants empirical investigation in future classroom-based

study. It can also make speaking activities more meaningful and intellectually engaging for learners. At the same time, successful implementation depends on context-sensitive planning. Intermediate learners need explicit scaffolding, supportive interaction, and clear assessment criteria. Teachers need training, and institutional practices need to recognize the value of discourse-level speaking outcomes. If these conditions are addressed, critical thinking-based instruction can play a significant role in transforming speaking pedagogy in Iranian EFL classrooms. Ultimately, enhancing oral argumentation through critical thinking is not only a language-teaching goal. It is also an educational goal. It prepares learners to participate more thoughtfully, confidently, and effectively in academic, professional, and social communication in English.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Payame Noor University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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