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HIGHER-ORDER THINKING AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence is one of the primary objectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, requiring learners not only to possess linguistic knowledge but also to use language effectively in meaningful communication. In recent years, higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) have been increasingly recognized as an important factor in developing communicative competence because they enable learners to analyze information, evaluate ideas, and express reasoned opinions during communication. This paper explores the relationship between higher-order thinking and communicative competence in EFL learning by synthesizing theoretical perspectives and recent empirical studies. The discussion draws on Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Mayer's (2002, 2008) Cognitive Theory of Learning, Ellis's (2003) Second Language Acquisition framework, and recent studies by Yin et al. (2024) and Jannah et al. (2026). The paper argues that integrating higher-order thinking into language instruction strengthens communicative competence by promoting meaningful interaction, critical thinking, and active language use.

Keywords

higher-order thinking skills, communicative competence, EFL, critical thinking, speaking, language learning

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Introduction

Developing communicative competence has become one of the central goals of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because learners are expected not only to acquire linguistic knowledge but also to use English effectively in academic, professional, and everyday situations (Ellis, 2003). Successful communication requires learners to express ideas clearly, interpret information, solve problems, and respond appropriately to different communicative contexts. These abilities extend beyond grammar and vocabulary and involve higher levels of cognitive processing.

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) have therefore received increasing attention in language education. According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), higher-order thinking includes analyzing, evaluating, and creating, enabling learners to engage actively with information instead of simply recalling knowledge. Such cognitive processes are essential for meaningful communication because they help learners organize ideas, justify opinions, and participate confidently in discussions.

Although previous studies have investigated higher-order thinking in speaking instruction and assessment (Jannah et al., 2026; Yin et al., 2024), the relationship between HOTS and communicative competence deserves further theoretical attention. Therefore, this paper examines how higher-order thinking contributes to the development of communicative competence in EFL learning by synthesizing relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical findings.

Literature Review

The concept of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) originates from Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which classifies cognitive learning into different levels. This framework was later revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), who identified analyzing, evaluating, and creating as the highest cognitive processes. These skills encourage learners to move beyond memorization and develop the ability to interpret information, solve problems, and produce meaningful responses.

The relationship between higher-order thinking and language learning is supported by Mayer's (2002, 2008) Cognitive Theory of Learning, which explains that meaningful learning occurs when learners actively select, organize, and integrate new information with their existing knowledge. In language classrooms, this process enables learners to understand, interpret, and communicate ideas more effectively. Similarly, Ellis (2003) emphasizes that second language acquisition develops through meaningful interaction, where learners negotiate meaning and actively participate in communication.

Recent studies further highlight the importance of higher-order thinking in EFL learning. Yin et al. (2024) argue that communicative competence should include learners' ability to think critically, organize ideas logically, and justify opinions during speaking tasks. Likewise, Jannah et al. (2026) report that integrating HOTS into speaking instruction increases learner engagement and promotes more meaningful classroom communication. Together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives demonstrate that higher-order thinking supports the development of communicative competence by combining cognitive engagement with effective language use.

Methodology

This study employed a narrative literature review to examine the relationship between higher-order thinking and communicative competence in EFL learning. Instead of collecting primary data, the paper synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature to develop a conceptual understanding of the topic. The analysis is based on Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Mayer's (2002, 2008) Cognitive Theory of Learning, Ellis's (2003) Second Language Acquisition framework, and the empirical studies conducted by Yin et al. (2024) and Jannah et al. (2026). The selected literature was analyzed thematically to identify common perspectives regarding the contribution of higher-order thinking to communicative competence.

Results and Discussion

The reviewed literature indicates that higher-order thinking skills play an important role in developing communicative competence in EFL learning. Although communicative competence has traditionally been associated with linguistic knowledge, the reviewed studies suggest that effective communication also depends on learners' ability to analyze information, evaluate ideas, and express well-reasoned opinions.

According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), analyzing, evaluating, and creating represent the highest levels of cognitive learning. These processes enable learners to communicate more purposefully by organizing ideas logically, responding critically to information, and producing meaningful language. From this perspective, communicative competence involves both language proficiency and cognitive engagement.

Mayer (2002, 2008) further explains that meaningful learning occurs when learners actively process new information and connect it with their previous knowledge. When applied to EFL instruction, this process encourages learners to communicate with greater confidence because they understand the meaning behind what they express rather than simply recalling memorized language. Likewise, Ellis (2003) argues that meaningful interaction creates opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and develop their language through authentic communication.

The empirical findings support these theoretical perspectives. Yin et al. (2024) emphasize that speaking assessment should evaluate critical thinking together with linguistic performance, as learners' ability to organize ideas and justify opinions reflects communicative competence. Similarly, Jannah et al. (2026) found that integrating HOTS into speaking instruction encourages learners to participate more actively in classroom communication and strengthens both their thinking skills and language performance.

Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that higher-order thinking is closely connected with commu-

nicative competence in EFL learning. Learners who engage in analytical, evaluative, and creative thinking are better prepared to communicate effectively because they are able to construct meaningful responses, support their ideas, and participate confidently in authentic communicative situations.

Conclusion

Higher-order thinking skills have become an essential component of communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The theoretical perspectives presented by Bloom (1956), Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), Mayer (2002, 2008), and Ellis (2003) demonstrate that meaningful communication requires more than linguistic knowledge. Learners need to analyze information, evaluate different viewpoints, and generate meaningful responses in order to communicate effectively.

The empirical studies by Yin et al. (2024) and Jannah et al. (2026) further support this view by showing that integrating higher-order thinking into speaking instruction and assessment promotes learners' cognitive engagement and improves communication. When learners are encouraged to think critically while using English, they become more confident in expressing ideas, supporting opinions, and participating in meaningful interaction.

Overall, this paper suggests that higher-order thinking and communicative competence are closely interconnected. Integrating HOTS into EFL instruction not only strengthens learners' language proficiency but also develops the cognitive skills necessary for successful communication. Therefore, EFL teachers should incorporate learning activities that encourage analysis, evaluation, and creativity to prepare learners for effective communication in academic and real-world contexts.

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