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The role of higher-order thinking skills in developing oral communication in EFL

Samadova Sevinch Tulkinovna

master of Arts in TESOL, English Teacher

Uzbekistan, Tashkent

E-mail: sevinchsamadova2309@gmail.com

Роль навыков мышления высшего порядка в развитии устной коммуникации при изучении английского как иностранного языка

Самадова Севинч Тулкиновна

магистр искусств по TESOL, преподаватель

английского языка

Узбекистан, г. Ташкент

Abstract

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) have become an essential component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, as they promote learners' ability to communicate effectively, engage in critical thinking, and solve complex problems. Although previous studies have examined the relationship between HOTS and oral communication, a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining this relationship remains insufficiently developed. This review pursues two primary objectives: to summarize the recent studies on HOTS and oral communication in EFL learning and

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to offer an integrated conceptual understanding on the relationship of HOTS and oral communication in EFL learning based on Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Mayer's (2002) Cognitive Theory of Learning, and Ellis's (2003) Second Language Acquisition framework. In order to reach this goal, the paper critically examines and integrates two new empirical research works on the use of HOTS in the teaching and evaluation of speaking in English as a foreign language. The findings of the reviewed studies suggest that cognitively challenging speaking tasks help students to develop their analytical, evaluative and creative thinking skills, and at the same time facilitate their ability to communicate orally with fluency, coherence, and higher-order thinking. This review aims to synthesize the views of cognition, education, and second language acquisition to propose a conceptual framework in order to explain the role of HOTS in EFL oral communication. The implications of results on language teaching, language assessment of speaking and further studies on the use of HOTS in the EFL classroom are also discussed.

Аннотация

Навыки мышления более высокого порядка (HOTS) стали центральным элементом в обеспечении того, чтобы учащиеся могли выражать свои мысли, принимать обоснованные решения и формировать решения. Несмотря на наличие исследований, изучающих HOTS и устную коммуникацию, адекватная теоретическая основа, описывающая эту взаимосвязь, пока не была полностью разработана. Цели данного обзора двоякие: во-первых, представить синтез результатов исследований по навыкам мышления высокого порядка (HOTS) и устной коммуникации на уроках ESL в рамках изучения (через современные исследования), а во-вторых, предложить интегративную концептуальную основу для интерпретации взаимосвязей между HOTS и устной коммуникацией в контексте EFL, опираясь на рамочные подходы пересмотренной таксономии Андерсона и Кратвола (2001), когнитивной теории обучения Майера (2002) и теории овладения вторым языком Эллиса (2003). Для достижения этой цели представляются критический анализ и синтез двух актуальных эмпирических исследований, посвящённых обучению навыкам ВЫСШЕГО ПОРЯДКА (HOTS) в контексте преподавания английского языка как иностранного (EFL) с фокусом на оценивание говорения. На основе этих исследований указывается, что оптимизированная высокая когнитивная активность делает говорение в рамках заданий не просто полезным напрямую для учащихся, чтобы развивать вместе с тем их аналитическое, оценочное и творческое мышление, а также обеспечивает достаточное применение на уровне беглости, связности и сокращает время ожидания между высказываниями. Цель данного обзора - опереться на когнитивную психологию, педагогику и теорию овладения вторым языком, чтобы создать концептуальную модель того, как развиваются навыки мышления более высокого порядка во время устного общения при изучении английского языка как иностранного. Также рассматриваются педагогические выводы данного исследования, анализ говорения в условиях обучения EFL в классе с опорой на HOTS и вопросы дальнейших исследований.

Keywords: higher-order thinking skills, oral communication, EFL, Bloom's taxonomy, critical thinking, second language acquisition, speaking, communicative competence.

Ключевые слова: навыки мышления высокого уровня, устная коммуникация, английский как иностранный, таксономия Блума, критическое мышление, освоение второго языка, устная речь, коммуникативная компетенция.

Introduction

Oral communication is one of the main objectives of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum as it helps students to articulate thoughts, engage in relevant communication and communicate successfully in the academic and professional context. Traditionally, EFL speaking instruction has primarily emphasized linguistic components, including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. However, effective oral communication also requires higher-level cognitive processes, including the ability to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and construct meaningful responses. These skills are referred to as higher order thinking skills (HOTS) and represent the highest order in Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy.

In recent years, a growing amount of attention has been given to the links between HOTS and oral communication. Mayer (2002) proposed the Cognitive Theory of Learning and Ellis (2003) proposed the Second Language Acquisition framework, both of which highlight the importance of learning through meaningful processing and organisation of information and the cognitive engagement in developing language, respectively. These views suggest that speaking is a higher order thinking activity, as well as a language skill.

The empirical studies in recent years have brought into the light the significance of using HOTS in EFL speaking. The importance of critical thinking for speaking assessment has been highlighted by Yin et al. (2024), while Jannah et al. (2026) illustrate the benefits of applying HOTS in teaching speaking for enhancing learners' cognitive involvement. Despite this, prior studies have focused on instructional practices or assessment only, with few studies trying to connect these to a larger theoretical framework.

This review is designed to synthesize the latest studies on the relationship between HOTS and oral communication in EFL learning. In light of the latest research in this field, this review suggests an integrated conceptualization of the link between HOTS and the oral communication and its implications in EFL teaching, assessment and future research.

Literature Review

Three complementary theoretical perspectives were adopted to explain the relationship between HOTS and oral communication from cognitive, educational, and second language acquisition perspectives. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for examining the role of cognitive engagement in EFL speaking development.

Higher Order Thinking involves analysing, evaluating and creating which are cognitive processes (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). These processes promote student engagement with learning, rather than just a focus on recall, and include the ability to make reasoned decisions and generate original responses. These cognitive skills are employed in speaking activities to plan, defend arguments, address communicative issues and present ideas more effectively.

This is complemented by Mayer's (2002) Cognitive Theory of Learning, which has been used to explain how meaningful learning takes place when learners select, organise and integrate new information with their existing knowledge. When students are asked to do more cognitively challenging activities, they learn more than just vocabulary and grammar. These learning activities support learners' language development.

Ellis (2003) also insists that meaningful interaction and positive language are the factors that help in second language acquisition. Speaking opportunities that involve negotiations for meaning, opinion and criticism provide opportunities for language development and for thinking. Thus, the ability to think critically while communicating in the target language is as important as linguistic knowledge in effective oral communication.

These three perspectives are combined in this review, which suggests a conceptual framework that presents HOTS as cognitive support for effective oral communication. The integrated view is used in evaluating recent empirical research and in grasping the impact of higher-order thinking on speaking instruction, evaluation and performance in EFL teaching.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a narrative literature review methodology to synthesize theoretical and empirical evidence concerning the relationship between higher-order thinking skills and oral communication in EFL contexts. Rather than collecting primary data, the review synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical literature to develop an integrated conceptual understanding of the relationship between HOTS and speaking development.

The theoretical framework is based on three key works: Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy; Mayer (2002), Cognitive Theory of Learning; and Ellis (2003), Second Language Acquisition. The sources are chosen because they describe how higher order thinking and oral communication relate to cognition, education and language.

In order to facilitate discussion of the theory, two recent empirical studies conducted by other researchers and published in peer-reviewed journals were selected purposively, since they directly relate to HOTS in EFL speaking. Yin et al. (2024) was added as a conceptual background for incorporating critical thinking in EAP speaking assessment, which is important because language skills need to be assessed in addition to cognitive skills. The reasons for choosing Jannah et al. (2026) were that the researchers discussed the lecturers' beliefs and practices about HOTS-oriented teaching of speaking and offered an integrated cognitive, linguistic, and affective perspective on speaking instruction. These studies complement each other in their approaches to assessment and classroom practice and are suitable for the purposes of this review.

Four inclusion criteria were used for the selection of the studies. The first step was to have them published in peer-reviewed journals. Second, they needed to pay attention to the higher order thinking skills in the context of EFL speaking. Thirdly, they had to examine speaking instruction or speaking assessment. Last but not least, they needed to present empirical evidence and examine the issue of relationship between HOTS and oral communication. Research focused on other language skills and research that did not investigate higher-order thinking was dropped.

The review was organized thematically. The three themes in the analysis were: (1) the role of HOTS in oral communication, (2) the cognitive processes involved in the development of oral language and (3) the pedagogical implications of incorporating HOTS in speaking instruction and assessment. Next, the results of the empirical studies were interpreted using the three theories to integrate the conceptual understanding of HOTS and oral communication in learning EFL.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the selected studies revealed several consistent findings that higher order thinking skills (HOTS) have a significant influence in the improvement of oral communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The studies investigate various aspects of speaking, but the common conclusion of all of them is that cognitively challenging tasks enhance learners' higher-order cognitive processes and their communicative competence.

Jannah et al. (2026) highlight the emphasis on the integration of HOTS in speaking instruction by using activities that require learners to analyze information, evaluating ideas, and making meaningful responses. The results of the research indicate that carefully designed cognitively demanding speaking tasks leads to engagement in learning, to higher order thinking and effective communication. Similarly, Yin et al. (2024) argue that speaking assessment should include critical thinking, supporting opinions, and organising ideas. Overall, these studies demonstrate the importance of using HOTS in class for the teaching and assessment of speaking.

The three theoretical perspectives used in this review provide a better understanding of the findings. In the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), analysing, evaluating, and creating are viewed as the highest order thinking skills. Mayer (2002) developed the CTL which focuses on meaningful learning as individuals actively process and integrate new information, instead of blindly memorizing it. In addition, the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) framework of Ellis (2003) proposes that language acquisition occurs as a result of meaningful interaction with others where interaction involves negotiating meaning and expressing ideas in real communicative contexts. The theories can be combined to account for the benefits of cognitively demanding speaking tasks in terms of language learning and thinking.

This review, which is a result of synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature, suggests a conceptual framework that integrates all of the above, and in which HOTS is the cognitive basis for effective oral communication. Students who do analysis, evaluation and creation in speaking activities tend to give coherent, well-reasoned and meaningful responses. The research result implies that the teaching of the language must not only focus on the ability to speak by developing grammar, vocabulary, but also promoting the thinking and problem-solving abilities of students.

One drawback of this review is that it is based on just two empirical studies. While the aforementioned studies offer significant information on the nature of HOTS in EFL speaking, further studies in varying learning environments and proficiency levels are still required to further establish the conceptual framework suggested in this research. The review, however, shows that the cognitive, educational, and second language acquisition perspectives will offer a better understanding of the role of higher-order thinking in promoting oral language competence in EFL learning.

Conclusion

This review integrated theoretical aspects and recent empirical studies on the relationship of higher order thinking skills (HOTS) with oral communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Based on Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Mayer's (2002) Cognitive Theory of Learning and Ellis's (2003) Second Language Acquisition model, the review reveals that higher-order cognitive processes, namely analysing, evaluating and creating, appear to play a significant role in the effective oral communication along with linguistic competence.

The findings of the selected empirical studies show that speaking instruction and assessment with the integration of HOTS can increase the engagement of learners in learning and help in oral communication. Language learning and critical thinking opportunities are provided in activities that prompt students to solve problems, support opinions, and provide new answers. The results indicate that HOTS is not a part of speaking instruction but an important piece of communicative competence.

One of the main strengths of this review is its fusion of three complementary theories into one conceptual framework that accounts for the role of higher-order thinking in facilitating oral communication in EFL environments. This framework offers a more concrete way to understand the link between cognition and language learning and implications for teaching and assessment. While this review focuses on two empirical studies, it is suggested that more research is needed to expand the evidence base from the educational contexts presented here and across other educational and learner contexts to further strengthen and validate the proposed framework.

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