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Higher Order Thinking Skills in English Language Teaching: The Case of Colleges of Education in Ghana

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of language has, for many years, been centered on the four language competencies- listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, in modern times, the need to train students with critical, analytical, evaluative, creative, and problem-solving skills in order to meet and deal with the complex nature of modern-day challenges and real-life issues has made the teaching and learning of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) indispensable. This study, therefore, investigates the attitude of language tutors towards the teaching of HOTS. This study has a descriptive qualitative approach. 39 English language tutors from the Colleges of Education who voluntarily availed themselves as participants were recruited for the study. Using semi-structured interviews and classroom observation as data collection instruments, the data were subjected to a thematic analysis. It is revealed that teachers perceive HOTS to be a good concept and hence use strategies such as asking open-ended questions, engaging learners in group works, classroom discussions, lecturing method, asking learners to produce and/or create their own materials and the giving of constructive feedback to implement it. Regardless of all their efforts, teachers face challenges such as incompetency, learner's low proficiency, learner's inability to grasp concepts, insufficient and irrelevant teaching materials, time, and financial constraints. The study, therefore, recommends that HOTS be given some more attention in language teaching in Ghana.

Keywords

language competencies, higher order thinking skills, language teaching, real-life issues

Introduction

The teaching and learning of the English language has for many years been centred on the four language competencies- speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, in recent times, the need to intentionally teach or incorporate critical and creative thinking into the teaching of language has become a major issue. Ansori (2019) asserts that, in English language teaching, aside from teaching the four language competencies, the need to teach and train students to become critical and creative thinkers has become an indispensable component of every ideal educational goal.

Setyarini & Ling (2019) explain Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in an educational context as the act of engaging in a complex and sophisticated judgmental thinking process of analysing, evaluating and creating. Explaining the elements of HOTS into some detail, Chidozie, Yusri, Muhammad Sukri, & Wilfredo (2014) asserts that analysing is the skill of breaking down information into meaningful components and (re)arranging them into a useful whole. Additionally, evaluating is the skill of reflecting and making or passing sound judgements and conclusions. Further, creating is the highest skill or ability to generate novel concepts or ideas. According to Jusnaeni (2020), the concept of HOTS is part of Bloom's (1956) general classification of learning and thinking skills consisting of two major levels- Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) opine that HOTS consist of three elements- *analysing*, *evaluating* and *creating*. Siti (2015) adds that Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) represent more context-dependent or context-rich and complex thought processes which include logical, critical, metacognitive, reflective, and creative thinking. Yeung (2016) attempts a simpler definition of HOTS when he indicates that it is the use of critical and creative thinking skills to solve difficult problems or issues. Ensuring, fostering and enhancing higher-order thinking skills among students have become essential to the attainment of educational objectives (Ganapathy, Kaur, Singh, Kaur & Kit, 2017). In fact, students who have a high level of HOTS are deemed to be likely more successful in their careers upon graduation and in their future study programmes than those who do not have HOTS (Tanujaya, Mumu & Margono, 2017). It is therefore clear that Higher Order Thinking Skills have become a fundamental tool in the teaching and learning process of language (Raheem & Said, 2019).

A study conducted by Ansori (2019) investigated the experiences of an English language teacher at the high school level in incorporating HOTS into the language classroom context. His focus was to find out the perceptions and behaviours of the teacher that sought to enhance the HOTS of learners in English teaching. The study, which employed a descriptive qualitative approach, made use of classroom observation and interviews as instruments for data collection. The findings of the study revealed that the teacher perceived HOTS to be a positive classroom practice and was aware of its importance. The teacher was also aware of the roles he had to play in actualising HOTS, the teaching strategies to employ and the assessment tools appropriate for HOTS.

Similarly, [Singh, Gopal, Tek, Masa Singh, Mostafa & Ambar Singh \(2020\)](#) investigated how secondary school English language teachers fostered HOTS particularly in the teaching of writing to weak language students. They used two high schools in Malaysia as the research sites. As descriptive qualitative research, the study used classroom observation and video recordings as the main instruments for data collection. Using the snowballing sampling technique, 4 language teachers were recruited from two secondary schools for the study. Each of the 4 participants was observed twice. Thematic analysis was used in analysing the data. The outcome of the study revealed that the teachers used teaching techniques that encouraged HOTS among students in the writing classroom. They educated the learners on the need for HOTS and that helped them to infer even in real-life challenges, by employing problem-solving skills and graphic organisers.

A careful scrutiny of the earlier studies reveals two serious gaps. First, geographical gap. It can be observed that scarcely has any of the studies been set in the African context. The concept of HOTS and its application in the language classroom in the African context, and specifically in Ghana, has received a worryingly less attention. Scholarly investigations have not focused on the Ghanaian classroom. Due to lack of empirical findings on the current situation of HOTS in Ghana, it is difficult to obtain any rigorous well-informed policy guidance and directive on it. At a time when education is expected to have a global outlook with HOTS being an indispensable tool, the lack of sufficient studies in the Ghanaian context is a serious problem. This is part of what makes this current study relevant and timely.

The second gap left in the earlier studies is the sample gap. Many of the earlier studies focused on pre-tertiary institutions and students- either Junior High School like [Setyarini & Ling \(2019\)](#) or Senior High School like [Singh, et al. \(2020\)](#). Rarely has studies on HOTS paid critical attention to tertiary institutions and students. Due to the scarcity of tertiary-focused studies on HOTS, it is difficult to know and appreciate the HOTS situation and its impact in the tertiary language classroom. This gap, just as the geographical gap, is closed in this current study.

More refreshingly, [Singh, et al. \(2020\)](#) report that teachers are already aware of how important it is to intentionally teach higher order thinking skills to students in schools therefore asking them to do so is not a difficult task. However, [Indriyana & Kuswandono \(2019\)](#) contend that, regardless of their awareness and readiness to incorporate HOTS in language teaching, the concept of HOTS is not really understood or appreciated by teachers of English language. Similarly, [Rajendran \(2013\)](#) argues that, generally, teachers of English language are insufficiently or ill-prepared to incorporate or teach HOTS in their lessons. In fact, [Ardini \(2017\)](#) admits that the average teacher would not find it easy to implement a HOTS-oriented lesson or classroom environment. This is because, beyond the fact that the teacher should obtain all the necessary teaching and learning materials, they must equally be competent in the appropriate teaching and learning techniques if a HOTS-based lesson can be successfully implemented. However, in the typical classroom setting in a developing nation like Ghana, these conditionalities are generally difficult to actualise. In most cases, it is either the appropriate materials are not available or dysfunctional, or the competencies of the teacher are in doubt. In fact, in some situations, time constraints, congestion of the class, financial constraints, among others hamper the

implementation of a HOTS classroom. Sometimes, the attitude of the learners too does not help to effectively achieve HOTS. The fact is that HOTS thrives on the assumption that a learner has sufficient grips of LOTS. The latter serves as a foundation for the former. However, there are cases where learners have not sufficiently mastered LOTS hence implementing HOTS becomes problematic.

It is such backdrop that makes the current study which investigates how HOTS is perceived and practised in the language classroom imperative, especially in a context like Ghana where there is no known documented empirical report on such field. [Raheem & Said](#) (2019) observe that, for a study that explores HOTS in the language classroom, understanding the personal beliefs and knowledge of the language teacher is essential. This is because, the collective personal beliefs and knowledge determine and influence the choices or decisions a teacher makes in order to attain a particular educational objective ([Donohoo](#) 2017). Obviously, the beliefs or knowledge a teacher has determines what kind of teaching practices they employ in the HOTS classroom. Given that HOTS is a major demand of the 21st century educational goals, it is important therefore, to understand and establish the perceptions, beliefs, ideas, opinions and attitudes which the language teacher has towards it. That is exactly what the study seeks to do. Aside from that, the study also investigates the challenges or barriers that hamper the successful implementation or incorporation of HOTS into the teaching and learning of language. Specifically, the study would provide answers to these research questions:

1. What perceptions do language tutors hold about HOTS?
2. How is HOTS practically implemented or realised in the language classroom?
3. What challenges or barriers do language tutors face in the implementation of HOTS?

Method

Approach and Design

The approach for the study is a descriptive qualitative approach. With this approach, the attitude, perceptions and challenges which the language teachers encounter in teaching or incorporating HOTS into the teaching and learning process are examined and described based on the data available. [Creswell](#) (2012) assert that the qualitative approach affords a researcher the opportunity to develop a detailed or in-depth analysis and description of a case. The design of the study is a case study. The choice for the case study is consistent with [Yin's](#) (2013) assertion that a case study investigates a contemporary issue, situation or phenomenon into details in their real-life contexts. [Thomas](#) (2014) equally asserts that case study allows for the investigation to be carried out on a single entity or smaller number of entities such as an individual, group, family, community, institution or some other social unit. The case for this study is the language teachers of colleges of education.

Sample

Thirty-nine English language teachers from 15 different colleges of education availed themselves and were recruited for the study. The researchers are of the considered

opinion that, for a qualitative study where numerical strength is not an utmost priority, recruiting about 39 language teachers provided sufficient data that could enable the researchers to engage in rigorous analysis and draw fairly comprehensive conclusions. This argument is situated in Mason's (2010) assertion that, for qualitative study, a range of 15 to 60 participants are enough to reach *saturation*.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data for the study. These were classroom observation and semi-structured interview. Triangulation of data from these two avenues was expected to strengthen the analysis and make the conclusions more rigorous. Alwehaibi's (2012) observation checklist was adapted to find out, examine and report directly on how HOTS is taught, incorporated or actualised in the teaching and learning of language in the tertiary classroom. Meanwhile, the interview was also employed in order to collect data on how the tutors perceived HOTS in terms of its importance, their roles and strategies in teaching or integrating it in the language lesson and their overall assessment of its impact on language teaching together with the challenges that came with its implementation.

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The raw data, collated from the observation and interview recordings, were coded, and patterned based on the themes that emerged consistently from them. The systematic clustering of data based on the common thematic patterns made the analysis of the data easier and more convenient to deal with. The data were collected between April-June, 2021.

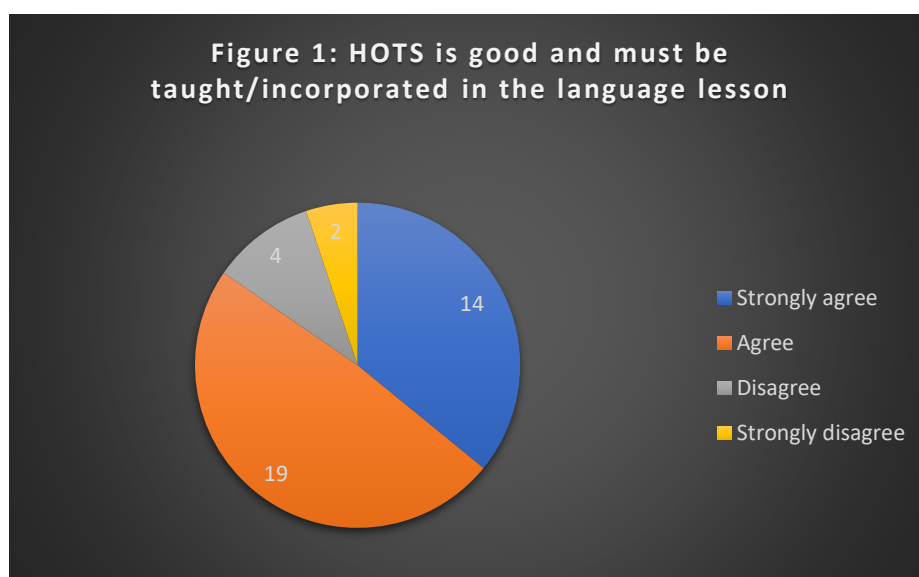
All the tutors of the English language in the colleges of education have a common WhatsApp and Telegram platforms where issues relating to the college system and English teaching are generally discussed. These virtual platforms have become the new avenues in the pandemic season hence the decision to use them. About 100 tutors are active participants on these platforms. The researchers themselves are part of these platforms. Therefore, getting access to the tutors was relatively easier. The tutors were informed on the platform about the research and how many were willing to participate in it. 39 of the tutors responded, called and/or sent direct messages to the researchers on their willingness to partake in it.

The goals of the study and confidentiality clauses were spelt out, explained and consented accordingly with all participants. After that, interview dates and times were scheduled on the whims of the participants. 720 minutes of lesson, that is, four full lessons lasting three hours each, were observed and examined through the observation checklist. The interview sessions were conducted predominantly via telephone after which the analyses were done.

Results & Discussion

Research Question 1: What perceptions do language tutors hold about HOTS?

The aim of this inquiry is to ascertain the mental position of language tutors regarding the concept of HOTS. Generally, the mental readiness or otherwise of an individual largely influences how they accept or reject a particular phenomenon and practises it. Therefore, it was important to know how tutors appreciate the concept. Four subthemes emerged out of this question and the responses of the participants are indicated in the sections below.

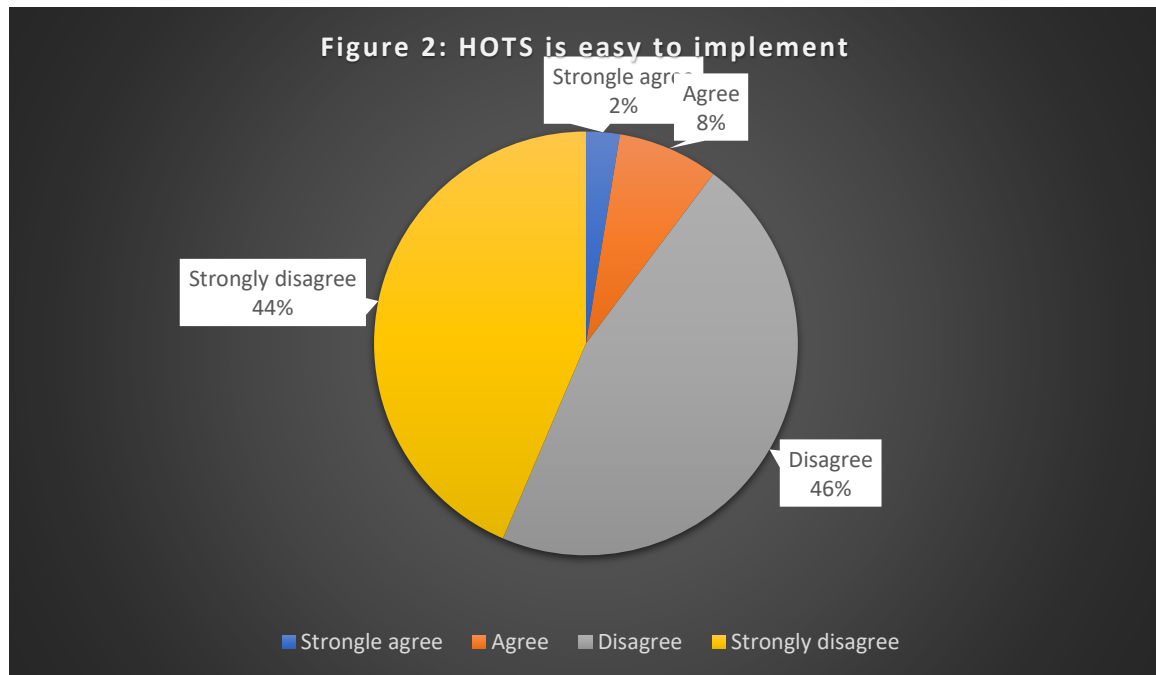


Reading from figure 1 above, it is established that while 19 of the respondents, representing 49%, “agree” that HOTS is a good thing and must be taught or incorporated in the language lesson, 14 of them, representing 36%, “strongly agree”. It could also be observed that 4 of the respondents, representing 10%, “disagree” and 2 respondents, representing 5%, topple at the bottom as the group that “strongly disagrees” that HOTS is good.

The fact that 85% of the respondents generally agrees that HOTS is good and encourages its integration into the teaching and learning of language portends some positive signal. The impression is that, given the opportunity, they are ready to accept the phenomenon and work with it. This corroborates the study findings of [Singh, Singh, Singh, Mostafa & Mohtar \(2018\)](#) which assert that HOTS is a good teaching practice especially for weak students because it helps them to better understand and appreciate concepts. Aside [Singh, et al. \(2018\)](#), almost all scholars and studies on HOTS in the language classroom attest that it is a good teaching practice and actually preferred over the other forms of thinking skills, LOTS and MOTS, especially in this modern era where education centres on training the individual to become analytical, critical and creative in their thinking and approach to daily life issues ([Raheem & Said, 2019](#)).

[Singh & Marappan \(2020\)](#), on their study on the importance of HOTS, confirm that its integration in the language classroom is non-negotiable. The need to train learners who

are practice oriented and critical enough to deal with issues has become the ultimate goal of most, if not all, educational goals and objectives. The teacher, who generally facilitates the construction of knowledge and the teaching and learning process in the classroom, therefore has a major role to play in the HOTS integration process. Since about 85% of the tutors perceives HOTS to be a good practice and vouches for its integration into the language classroom, then it can fairly be deduced that their readiness to implement same, given all the necessary support, is not in doubt.



Beyond establishing the belief of the language tutors in terms of whether HOTS is good or not, the study also went further to ascertain how easy or difficult the tutors considered the teaching or integration of HOTS to be. Figure 2 above illustrates the responses of the participants.

It can be interpreted from figure 2 that, while 17 respondents, representing 44%, “strongly disagree” that HOTS is easy to implement, 18 of them, representing 46%, “disagree”. On the contrary, three of the respondents, representing 8%, as shown in the data, have the belief that HOTS is easy to implement and 1 respondent, representing 2%, perceive HOTS to be easy. From the data, it can be read that 90% of the respondents generally disagree with the assertion that HOTS is easy to implement in the language classroom while 10% have the view that it is easy.

The evidence gathered from the data are consistent with the assertion of [Sulaiman, Muniyan, Madhvan, Hasan, & Rahim \(2017\)](#) that, it is generally difficult to implement HOTS especially for a large class size. In Ghana, the typical tertiary classroom, especially for language courses, is very large. Therefore, implementing or integrating HOTS in the teaching and learning process has not been an easy practice. It is therefore not surprising that 90% of the respondents insist that HOTS is difficult to practise.

The perception that HOTS is not an easy practice is grounded on several assumptions and factors. [Sutarto \(2017\)](#), for example, opine that, since the successful implementation of HOTS largely depends on the teacher, he/she needs to develop the ability or be trained to develop HOTS skills. Since many language tutors are not trained in HOTS (as would be revealed later in the study), it is difficult for them to implement it. Similarly, [Mursyid & Kurniawati \(2019\)](#) believe that HOTS is a difficult practice generally because it is usually activated when an individual meets and have to deal with unfamiliar challenges who solutions are usually complex, non-structured and non-routined.

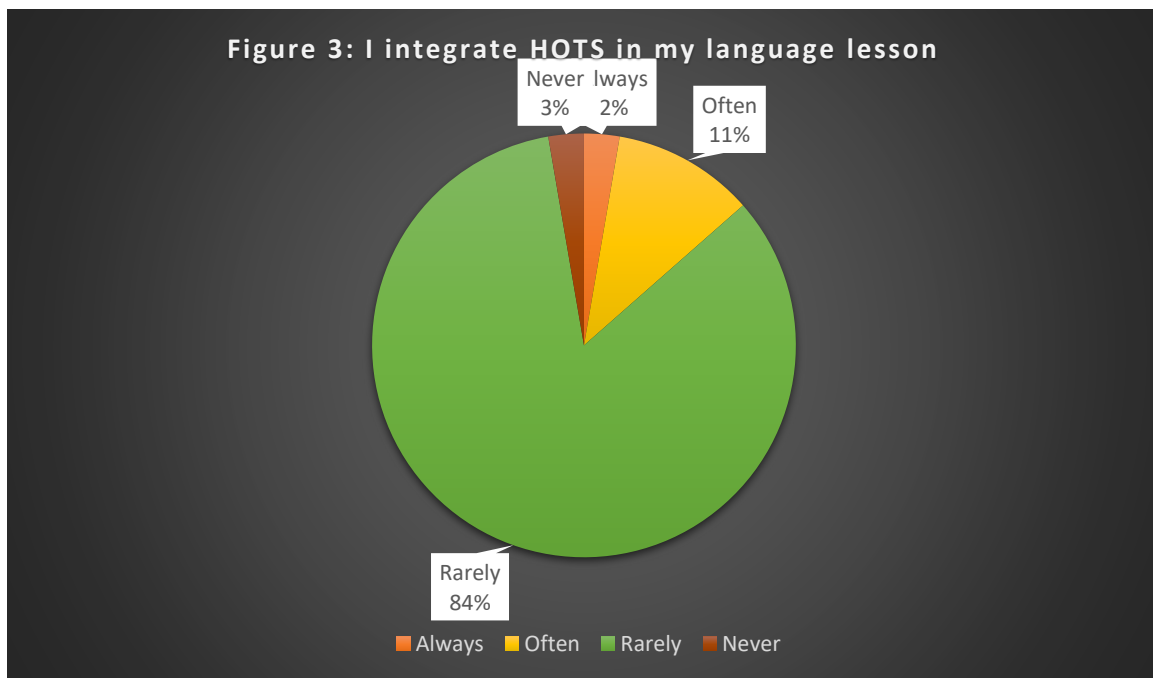


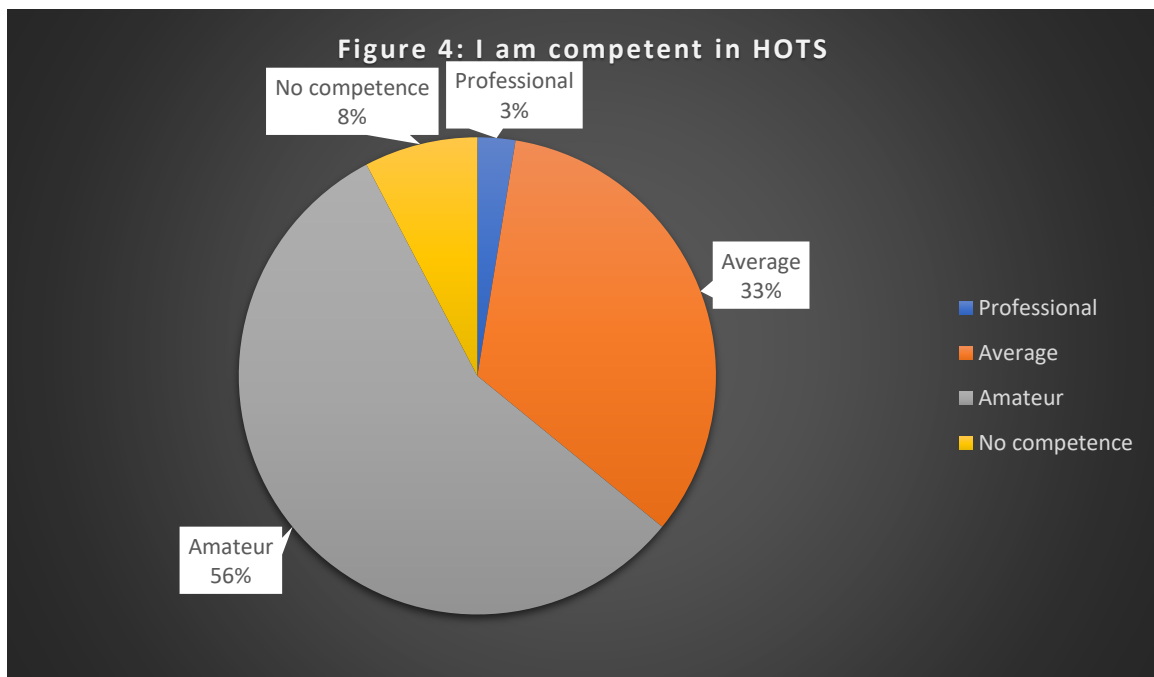
Figure 3 reveals the frequency with which language tutors teach or integrate HOTS in their classroom and to confirm whether at all they even do it. It is clear from the data that, while 1 respondent, representing 3%, has “never” used HOTS in his lesson, 31 of them, representing 84%, “rarely” use HOTS in their language class. Again, only one person confirms that he always uses HOTS in class and four respondents, representing 11%, assert that they use HOTS.

Given the fact that, majority of tutors perceive HOTS to be a very good practice and wish it would be integrated into language teaching as revealed in figure 3, it is quite unfortunate and almost contrasting that about 87% of them have never or rarely use it in their class. This confirms the long-standing dichotomy between theory and practice, where it is generally assumed that theory does not always reflect or materialise into practice. While the respondents think that HOTS must be integrated in the language class, the reality or practical field does not reflect the same.

This theory-practice or wish-reality dichotomy could be attributed to a number of factors. Major among these factors, aside the lack of relevant teaching and learning materials and conducive classroom environment, is the insufficient competence of the language tutor. Unlike LOTS, where the components such as remembering, understanding, and applying are relatively easy to incorporate, the elements of HOTS- analysing, evaluating

and creating- are quite difficult to practise, especially in a context like Ghana where most of the educational facilities do not make provisions for it.

Moreover, as revealed in figure 3, the teachers who must engineer the integration of HOTS in the language class perceive the concept to be a difficult one. It is quite natural for anyone who sees a thing to be difficult not to engage in it or incorporate it in their daily lives and activities. The evidence on the frequency of HOTS usage in the language lesson is very significant, not only to this study, but also to educational planners and policymakers on how to make curriculum provisions or create the appropriate learning environments that support and encourage the implementation of HOTS.



To be analytical, evaluative and creative is not an inborn or natural quality, and even if it were, it would still need some considerable shaping or intentional grooming, training and nurturing just as any other inborn quality (Mursyid & Kurniawati, 2019).

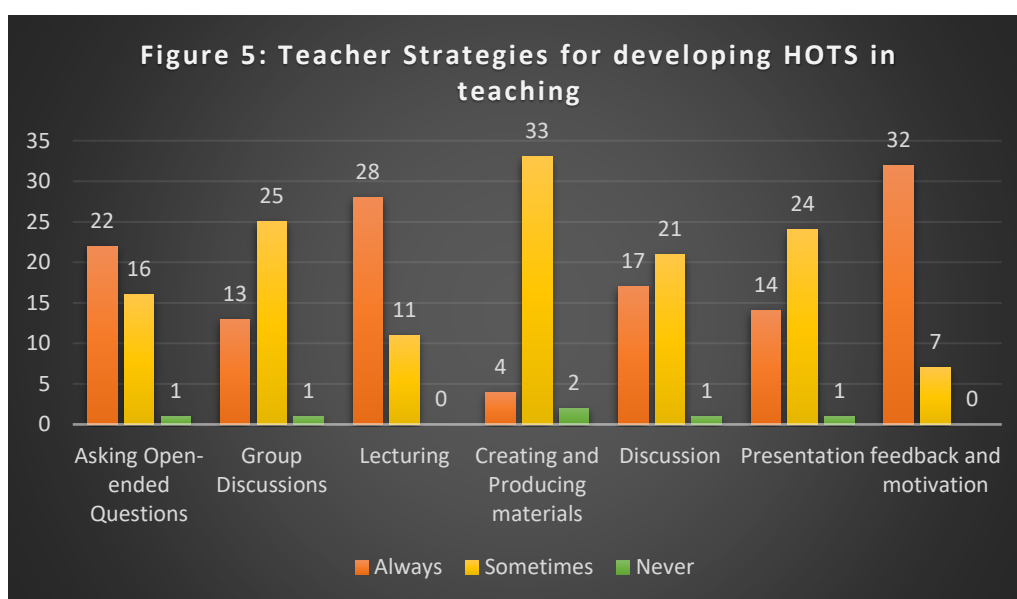
Given the theme in figure 4, where about 90% of the respondents confirmed that they have never or rarely used HOTS in the language class, it was considered important to know how tutors perceived their competence level in HOTS.

As could be observed in figure 4, over half of the respondents, that is, 22 of them, representing 56% perceive themselves as amateur in competence in HOTS and 13, representing 33% of the respondents consider themselves as possessing average competence in HOTS. And, while 3 respondents, representing 8%, have no competence in HOTS, 3%, on the contrary, think they have professional competence in it.

Cumulatively, the data reveal that 97% of the language tutors in the colleges have little to no competence in the implementation, integration or teaching of higher order thinking skills in the language classroom. This is regardless of the fact that scholars have opined that it is important for teachers to be trained in HOTS (Siti, 2015).

Research Question 2: How is HOTS practically implemented or realised in the language classroom?

Indriyana & Kuswandono (2019) content that it is important to implement HOTS in the teaching and learning process. In doing so, the teacher would have to consciously develop plans and roll out strategies that will help them practically actualise the concept in the language lesson. Although, as revealed in earlier discussions in response to question 1, it was revealed that language tutors rarely make a conscious implementation or integration of HOTS in their lessons, this section attempts to find out what tutors practically do in the classroom on the few occasions they implement it. In this section, data from the interview and observation are corroborated to reveal thematically the dominant strategies employed by language tutors in the implementation of HOTS. Figure 5 below represents the responses of the participants.



As indicated in figure 5 above, the language tutors adopt some strategies in teaching or incorporating HOTS in their language lessons. Dominant among these varied strategies are the seven thematic ones illustrated in figure 5. According to the data from the classroom observation, it could be emphasised that these strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some of the tutors adopted, depending on contexts and circumstances, multiple strategies in a single lesson in order to ensure that lesson objectives are successfully achieved. With relevant supporting excerpts from the interviews and observations, details of the strategies are explained below.

Asking Open-ended Questions

Fundamentally, higher-order thinking skills consist of three skills on Bloom’s taxonomy- analyse, evaluate, and create. Limbach & Waugh (2010) believe that through (open-ended) questions, the critical and creative thinking skills of students could be properly developed. Adding on, Indriyana & Kuswandono (2019) insinuate that teachers normally adopt the question-and-answer techniques in order to examine or review learning and compel learners to think critically. Similarly, the respondents believe that in order to

develop HOTS in the students, using, applying and asking open-ended questions frequently, predominantly, wh-questions, was instrumental. Wh-questions are questions that generally start with wh-words such as *who, what, when, where, which* and *how*.

Adopting the open-ended questioning is consistent with [Kamarulzaman \(2016\)](#) and [Harvey & Goudvis \(2017\)](#) who believe that asking open-ended questions actually promotes and helps in developing HOTS in students because learners are able to think critically, construct meaning, look for and find answers, solve problems and discover new information. Indeed, the participants had no doubt that the question-and-answer strategy had been a very effective tool for them. Data from figure 7 shows that 22 respondents use open-ended questions always and 16 use it sometimes while only 3 claim they have never used it. This generally frequent use of the strategy signifies how important tutors consider it to be. A participant had this to say

I don't want my students to be rote learners, so I try to ask open-ended questions every time I go to class. My intention is to develop in them the ability to think critically and analyse situations themselves. In this regard, wh-questions have been extremely instrumental.

In fact, a participant actually went further to recommend open-ended questions to all tutors who wish to develop HOTS in learners. This is in consonance with [Yen & Halili \(2015\)](#) who equally highly recommend that this technique of asking open-ended questions be adopted by teachers in teaching HOTS. The participant said,

Asking open-ended questions is one of the most effective ways of developing HOTS in learners. That is my observation after teaching for about 15 years of my life. I have observed that, anytime learners are asked open-ended questions, they are compelled to delve deeper into their minds and conscience and bring out practical responses. I recommend this strategy to everyone.

Group work

The adoption and use of group discussions as a teaching strategy in aiding learners to develop HOTS came up prominently in the data. Indeed, the data on figure 7 reveal that while 13 respondents use group discussion teaching strategy always, 25 of them use it sometimes and only one person has never used it. The fact that 38 respondents find this strategy useful signifies how efficient it is in developing HOTS in learners. It is observed that language tutors use group allocations to encourage and engage learners in critical peer-to-peer discussions. [Williams \(2015\)](#) actually insists that group discussions encourage learners' involvement in learning and enhance self-learning through peer-based activities. A participant indicated that,

I normally put my students into groups. I mix good students with weak ones. I have observed that learners in my class learn better from their peers than from me, the tutor. When they learn with their peers, they ask critical questions and make deep-thinking contributions in the learning process.

Another respondent also remarked,

I encourage peer learning in my class. Usually, I put my class into groups of 5 and assign them different tasks. I have observed that when they work together as team, they are able to share ideas, think creatively and come out with practical solutions.

The use of group discussions reflects [Siswanti & Setyaningsih's](#) (2012) assertion that group discussions are able to ensure that learners actively participate in a lesson, build on their confidence and enhance their motivation in the class. [Yuhaniz, Samsudin, Ismail & Zaki](#) (2018) discovered that engaging learners in group learning and discussion activities enhance three aspects of learning; firstly, learners are engaged in the lesson. Secondly, learners become collaborative with their peers. Thirdly, learners engage in critical thinking and other HOTS oriented activities.

Lecturing

Although education scholars believe that, in the modern era of education system, teacher-centred approach to teaching is a highly discouraged practice, some of the respondents resorted to it as their means of developing HOTS in learners. In fact, observation of the data shows that the lecturing method is almost always a given. The tutors admitted using the lecture method sometimes even without consciously doing so. To them, the lecturing method had become part and parcel of them such that in cases where they are so intentional of using learner-centred approach, they end up reverting.

Data on figure 5 shows that 28 respondents said they always use lecture method and the rest admitted using it some of the time. Interestingly, no of respondents indicated they had "never" used the method. The tutors justified this by indicating that, they believe whichever method a tutor adopts in class, he/she would need to take time and explain concepts into detail with learners. Some of them said,

I use the lecture method always. Tertiary students are matured so they don't need too much practice in the language class. They need to understand underlying theories behind some practices and that's exactly what I do.

The lecture method is an integral part of every classroom practice. Even in days when I use role play and dramatization, I spend some time to explain and lecture the learners on what and how they must go about activities.

Creating and producing materials

The highest level of HOTS in the Bloom taxonomy is to create, birth or bring into existence of a novel thing. In the language class, creation connotes developing a novel English language-based material to address a particular issue ([Raheem & Said](#), 2019). [Hakim, Sariyatun & Sudiyanto](#) (2018) opine that any time a teacher tasks learners to create something, he/she has actually invited them into a real-world situation where they are compelled to think critically and creatively and develop an appropriate solution for a particular situation. In figure 7 above, it is revealed that 33 tutors, representing 85%, "sometimes" employ this strategy while 4 and 2 of them, representing 10% and 5%

respectively, “always” and “never” use it respectively. For a tool that is used by 95% of the respondents, it speaks volumes of how relevant these respondents see such tool in ensuring HOTS is achieved. Some of the respondents explained how they employed this strategy in the language class.

I task my learners to write their own poems based on their exposure and knowledge about poetry. I normally ask them to develop their own poems and ensure that they feature all the major poetic devices in them. Interestingly, anytime I task my learners to create something, they generally do brilliantly well and that makes me fulfilled as a teacher.

Creation is not an easy thing. To compose or put disintegrated elements together in order to get a complete whole is not an easy job. I really struggle to get my learners to create new things on their own. That is why I don't always use this strategy but the occasions I have used it too, it has proven to be very effective.

Discussion

Classroom discussion is one of the good teaching practices because it is able to bring out both the weaknesses and strengths of learners. [Raheem & Said \(2019\)](#) elaborate that discussions allow especially the low proficiency learners to be able to feel comfortable and have open academic interactions with their peers and tutors. Discussion is one of the predominant themes that came out in the data. Many tutors use this strategy in developing learners' HOTS. From figure 1, 38 of the respondents, representing 97%, use discussion as a strategy either “always” or “sometimes”. This shows how dependent tutors are on this strategy as an effective tool for HOTS implementation. A participant indicated,

I can't hold a full class session without engaging in discussions with the learners. It helps the students to come out with their opinions about issues and develop a converging ground for divergent views.

This assertion consolidates [Fogarty, Kerns & Pete's \(2017\)](#) contention that, through dialogues and discussions, the teacher's role in ensuring that students thinking capacities are unlocked and encouraged is accomplished. In agreement, [Hakim, Sariyatun & Sudiyanto \(2018\)](#) posit that discussions are beneficial to learners in the sense that it helps them to constantly develop their thinking abilities as they get challenged with daily topical and practical issues and are allowed enough convenient classroom contexts to express themselves freely. All these points raised by earlier scholars and consolidated by the data of this study show that the discussion strategy is in fact a good strategy to use in incorporating, integrating, and teaching HOTS.

Feedback

Feedback is a very important part of the teaching and learning process (Fenyl et al, 2019). Without cogent feedback, one would find it difficult to determine how successful or otherwise the teaching and learning process has been. It was observed in the data, as presented in figure 7 above, that 32 respondents, representing 82%, use feedback always while 7, representing 18%, apply feedback sometimes. There is no respondent who

indicated that they had never used feedback in their teaching. Providing feedback and giving directions on how one can improve on their work helps one to develop higher order thinking skills (Fenyi et al, *ibid*).

Through feedback, people avoid mistakes they made in the past and do better next time. This assertion relates to [Limbach & Waugh's](#) (2010) position on feedback as a tool for refining, reviewing, assessing learning, assessing teaching and improving understanding. In the data, it was realised that the feedback came in two ways. From tutors to their learners after they had assessed their assignments or exercises and the feedback from the learners to the tutors after the latter had finished delivering the lesson and wish to know how former saw the entire process.

Teacher to students:

All of you have done well. Your presentations show clearly that you understood the topic very well. Keep it up. However, I realised that none of you examined the passage well, especially the last paragraph.

Students to teacher:

Madam, I was able to understand the definition, but I couldn't get the examples clearly. It looks like you rushed through due to the limited time. I'll see you privately for some more explanation.

Research Question 3: What challenges or barriers do language tutors face in the implementation of HOTS?

Language tutors in the colleges agree that critical and higher order thinking skills are crucial to the enhancement of learners' cognitive skills and have expressed their desire and readiness to implement HOTS and any other strategy that would develop the thinking skills of learners ([Pillay, Singh, & Yunus, 2020](#)). However, several factors mitigate against the successful implementation of the teaching and learning or integration of HOTS in the English language lesson. These challenges can be categorised into six themes.

Tutors' own incompetency and perceptions

One of the fundamental themes that came out strongly in the data was the tutors own admission of their insufficient experience, knowledge and some negative perceptions they held about the concept of HOTS ([Pillay, Singh, & Yunus, 2020](#); [Raheem & Said, 2019](#); [Setyarini & Ling, 2019](#)). The data reveal that teachers prefer to teach facts and are used to the teacher-centred approach to teaching rather than a more constructivist approach where classroom practice and knowledge negotiations centre on the student. As revealed in figure 4, 90% of teachers perceive HOTS to be very difficult to implement in the language classroom hence they shy away from it. A respondent intimated,

Honestly, I am used to delivering facts to students. In fact, the learners themselves do not really expect me to come to class and discuss lessons with them. They see teachers as fountain of knowledge who must impact it into them directly.

Another participant opined,

I avoid teaching or incorporating HOTS in my lesson because I think it is too difficult to implement. HOTS demands too much work, time and money commitments, deeper practical knowledge and understanding, and several complex teaching practices and strategies. Due to these, it is difficult to successfully implement HOTS hence I totally avoid it.

Interestingly, some teachers even perceive that not all students have the innate ability to develop HOTS hence it is a complete waste of time to teach them. This philosophy is in contravention with the position of [Williams \(2015\)](#) and [Saifer \(2018\)](#) that every learner or individual has the innate ability to develop HOTS hence all that a teacher must do is to facilitate or activate it. A tutor opined,

I don't think all students can be creative, critical or analytical. In fact, I think some of them don't deserve the classroom. Their place must be in the practical fields such as carpentry, masonry, plumbing and others. For such learners, I don't waste my time teaching them HOTS.

Learner' low proficiency

The findings of this study suggest that due to the low proficiency of learners in English language, it is difficult to actively engage them in the teaching and learning process. HOTS involves some practical activities such as brainstorming, asking and answering questions, understanding and applying concepts and contents, and creating novel things ([Aziz Ahmed, Ismail, Ibrahim, & Samat, 2017](#)). However, learners with low proficiency normally find it difficult to answer questions, engage in brainstorming activities and articulate their opinions, albeit critical or creative it is ([Singh, et al., 2018](#)). A respondent indicated

It is so difficult to engage in constructive and intellectual discussions with my students. Their proficiency in English is so low. Sometimes, their opinions are reasonable but how to properly articulate them is the problem. This is a huge challenge for the implementation of HOTS.

Upon comparing this finding with some earlier works, a similar case was found. [Shafeei, Hassan, Ismail, & Aziz \(2017\)](#) discover that students with low proficiency find it difficult to adapt to change, understand content and questions, and provide responses as well. They discovered two basic scenarios. First, students could only provide shorts answers to questions or generally could not involve themselves much. Second, students did not understand anything hence stayed passive in the teaching and learning process. This emphasises the fact that learners with low proficiency in English tend to either passively involve themselves or completely stay uninvolved in the class.

Students' inability to grasp concepts

Another challenge against the effective implementation of HOTS is the general inability of students to grasp the rather convoluted concept of HOTS. HOTS is a complex concept. The ability to be critical, analytical, evaluative, and creative is not a straightforward

phenomenon (Conklin, 2012; Saifer, 2018). Therefore, the concept can be difficult to grasp and this is exactly what is happening in the language classroom in Ghana, according to the data gathered. A respondent remarked,

My students find it difficult to grasp the HOTS concept. They are used to rote learning and memorising; hence they reject an attempt at engaging them in critical and creative thinking. This makes teaching or incorporating HOTS in the language lesson challenging.

Insufficient and irrelevant teaching materials

Teaching and learning resources and materials play important roles in the teaching and learning process. The lack of enough relevant teaching resources is therefore a major problem for most teachers (Pillay, Singh, & Yunus, 2020). Budsankom et al (2015) insinuate that beyond the intellectual and psychological characteristics of students, teaching and learning materials also impact on learners' higher order thinking skills hence the absence of these materials negatively influence the extent to which the teaching of HOTS can be successful or otherwise. In this regard, a participant indicated

Sometimes, the desire to teach HOTS is there. The love and interest are there. But the resources to support the teaching of HOTS are not there. It therefore gets extremely challenging to teach the concept abstractly when HOTS inherently demands that concepts be practiced and situated in real-life contexts.

Constraints of time

A major thematic issue that was raised by the respondents was the constraints of time. HOTS demands sufficient devotion and commitment of time. It takes a lot of time to practically engage all or most of the students sufficiently to discuss, analyse and create novel ideas or materials. However, due to limited time allocation for lessons, teachers complain that they are not able to thoroughly take learners through all the higher order thinking skills. A respondent argued

The nature of the teaching timetable does not support a holistic implementation of HOTS in the language class. Time allocations for lessons are very restrictive hence one is compelled to teaching of facts.

Another participant opined that,

Teachers are generally hard pressed for time. The curriculum is loaded to the extent that, sometimes, a teacher is compelled to teach multiple language topics in a single class session. This discourages the implementation of HOTS which requires ample time for critically analysing, evaluating and creating.

Financial constraints

The teaching and learning of higher order thinking skills seem to come along with sufficient time and money investments, unlike LOTS where learners are merely taught to remember facts and learn by rote. With HOTS, teachers and learners are expected to practically manipulate teaching and learning materials, work with and around them, and

create their own versions of materials. Although the government, through the Ministry of Education and other supervisory bodies like the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission do provide some teaching and materials, the respondents indicated that they are compelled to purchase some other teaching materials themselves with their meagre salaries. This makes the teaching of HOTS a daunting task. A participant complained that,

The materials from government are woefully inadequate. Therefore, we are forced to buy some more others from our salaries. And since we are unable to afford some of the teaching materials, we do not teach HOTS as often as should be.

Conclusion

This study has made some attempts at investigating and exploring the teaching and learning or integration of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) into the teaching of language in an ESL context. The import of the study drifts away from the almost conventional attention on the teaching of the four main language competencies- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Many available literatures on language teaching some of which have been reviewed in this study, have revealed that HOTS has become a modern topical issue in language teaching and ultimately featured in global educational goals and objectives and curricula. The need to teach and train learners with the appropriate critical, creative and problem-solving skills to meet the demands of real-life issues, industry and job market has given prominence to the integration of HOTS in curricula and classroom practice.

This study, which is a descriptive qualitative research work, used semi-structured interviews and classroom observations as the instruments for collecting the data. Although the study's population was all the English language tutors in the Colleges of Education in Ghana, 39 availed themselves voluntarily to participate. Upon a careful assessment of the data through a thematic analysis, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. HOTS is a very good teaching practice and must be encouraged in language teaching. Tutors are ready to teach or incorporate it in their classroom practice given all the necessary encouragements, environment, materials, and support.
2. In order to realise the concept of HOTS practically in the language classroom, teachers make use of some teaching strategies. Dominant among these teaching practices as thematised in the study are asking of open-ended questions, engaging learners in group works, classroom discussions, lecturing method, asking learners to produce and/or create their own materials and the giving of constructive feedback.
3. There are challenges with the implementation of HOTS in the language classroom. As revealed in the data, these challenges include tutors own incompetency, learner's low proficiency, learner's inability to grasp concepts, insufficient and irrelevant teaching materials, time and financial constraints.

Recommendation

Practically, the teaching and learning of HOTS in the language classroom in the Colleges of Education in Ghana must be given more prominence. This should reflect in the organisation of regular training sessions for tutors to build on their competence. Also, the provision and maintenance of sufficient and relevant materials and the creation of a conducive learning environment for learners to practise HOTS must be major concerns to policy planners and educational stakeholders.

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