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COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AMONG FINAL-YEAR ENGLISH PROGRAMME STUDENTS AT IIUM

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ABSTRACT

In an era of rapid globalisation and technological advancement, effective communication and critical thinking are essential for academic and career success. However, many recent graduates lack these key skills that are highly valued by employers. This study examines the levels of communicative competence and critical thinking skills among final-year students in three English programmes—TESL, ECOM, and BENL—at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Using a quantitative, correlational research design, data were collected through a purposive sampling of 90 students. Structured questionnaires assessed various competencies, and the reliability of the instruments was verified using SPSS Version 20. Findings revealed that students exhibited high levels of communicative competence and critical thinking skills, with a significant positive relationship between overall communicative competence and critical thinking ($\beta = .622, p < .05$). Specifically, linguistic and functional competencies were significant predictors of critical thinking skills, while sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies were not. These results suggest that IIUM's curriculum and pedagogical methods may play a critical role in fostering these competencies, and preparing students more effectively for employment. The study recommends further investigation into how integrated communicative competence can be enhanced across different academic levels and genders. This insight is valuable for policymakers, educators, and students alike in shaping programmes that align with industry expectations and improve employability.

Keywords: communicative competence, critical thinking skills, English communication skills, ESL learners, higher education

INTRODUCTION

One of the main educational goals of higher education and key competencies needed in the 21st century is critical thinking or more widely known as higher-order thinking skills (Golden, 2023; Mohamad Ali, 2017). Critical thinking has gained a momentous interest in research for the

last 20 years. A recent systematic literature review by Wicaksono et al. (2024) found that the research trend in critical thinking has been majorly linked with education, curriculum and educational assessments. It was reported that Malaysia has contributed 130 publications on the research of critical thinking, which reinforces the notion that critical thinking skills are a key objective of the Malaysian education system. As mentioned in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (2019), the reformation of the Malaysian education system is certainly equipped to face the challenges of the 21st-century real world as one of the foundations for individual student aspiration includes critical thinking skills. A study by Penkauskienė et al. (2019) investigated employers' views on how they perceive critical thinking skills being demonstrated at the workplace. The researchers found that having the capacity to avoid mistakes, have better decision-making, and regulate and correct themselves are the critical thinking skills valued in the working environment

Like critical thinking, communication skills are widely recognized as essential for workforce readiness by both students and teachers, with authorities identifying them as a top priority for skill acquisition by 2030 (OECD, n.d.). A significant challenge faced by educational institutions today is teaching students to communicate effectively across diverse and evolving information platforms (Morreale et al., 2017). While higher education curricula often cover various aspects of communication—including linguistic, pragmatic, and social skills—explicit instruction in pragmatic and social competencies remains limited. Increasing focus on social and emotional intelligence highlights its importance in students' personal and career success. Communication skills provide the opportunity to improve relationships, productivity, and work satisfaction. Such positive outcomes can only be achieved when one knows how to communicate competently, and effectively, using appropriate registers and analytical thinking skills, with exemplary use of non-verbal and verbal behaviours in any social context. This reflects the conceptualisation of communicative competence that goes beyond the general definition of communication skills and focuses more on achieving communicative goals (Kiessling & Fabry, 2021; Nešić and Hamidović, 2022).

Employers are increasingly looking for graduates who can navigate complex social interactions and collaborate across teams, both of which require high levels of sociolinguistic and discourse competence (Ahmad Nasaruddin et al., 2024; Raja Reza, 2024). Communicative competence has become a key factor in differentiating candidates in the competitive job market, influencing not only initial employment but also long-term professional success (Zainuddin et al., 2019). Hence, communicative competence is crucial for graduate employability as it enables individuals to convey ideas clearly, collaborate effectively, and adapt language use across different

professional settings. Communicative competence, including skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability in diverse settings, is vital for graduates' success in the global workforce, making soft skills crucial for job readiness and career growth (Nadarajah, 2021; Mohd Tahir et al., 2018). These skills align with the graduate attributes in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2015, pp. 14-15).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the recognised importance of critical thinking and communicative competence, many graduates still enter the workforce lacking these essential skills, as employers often favour candidates with well-rounded employability skills over those with purely academic achievements (Ahmad Nasaruddin et al., 2024; Abdul Kadir et al., 2020; Abdul Majid et al., 2020). Graduates who possess a blend of skills, knowledge, and character traits not only succeed individually but also contribute positively to their organisations and the broader economy. However, research highlights a disconnect between higher education and industry expectations, with many graduates underprepared in critical thinking and communication skills required for job readiness (Robinson, 2024). This skills gap is reflected in Malaysia's employment statistics; in 2022, 187,000 fresh graduates were unemployed, a figure likely to increase due to perceived gaps in skills, knowledge, and attitudes as identified by the Ministry of Education (New Straits Times, 2023). Additionally, Malaysia's graduate unemployment rate is significantly higher than the national average, raising concerns about the adequacy of educational preparation to meet industry demands (Khan et al., 2021). Addressing this gap requires collaboration between academic institutions and industries to develop strategies that target skill deficiencies in graduates (Mani & Wan Salmuni Wan Mustaffa, 2024; Nadarajah, 2021).

Moreover, English proficiency is a growing challenge for Malaysian graduates entering the corporate sector, where English is often the primary language. Limited English fluency can impede their ability to articulate ideas critically and effectively. A systematic review by Noah and Abdul Aziz (2020) on soft skills development among Malaysian undergraduates confirmed that many of them lack essential English communication skills, with some questioning its necessity, despite its relevance in the corporate sector. Employers emphasise that degrees from prestigious institutions alone are insufficient, as graduates must demonstrate critical thinking and effective communication to succeed in today's competitive job market (Raja Reza, 2024; Nesaratnam et al., 2020). In light of the vital roles that communicative competence and critical thinking skills play in preparing students for professional demands, this study focuses on these competencies among final-year English programme students at IIUM. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) determine the

levels of communicative competence and critical thinking skills among these students, and (2) examine the relationship between components of communicative competence—including sociolinguistic, functional, discourse, linguistic, and strategic competencies—and critical thinking skills. These insights are intended to inform pedagogical approaches, curriculum development, and policy decisions to better equip graduates for the workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the skill to communicate proficiently with mastery use of language in any social context or private communication. The chronological definition of communicative competence started way back to Hymes (1972), followed by Savignon's (1983) design of the communicative competence model which was further expanded by Canale and Swain (1980) and finally evolved to a model constructed by the Council of Europe (2001) entitled Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). Hence, Canale and Swain (1980) constructed an in-depth model of communicative competence into four components:

I. Grammatical Competence

- Concerns with mastery of Vocabulary, Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Orthographic rules.

II. Discourse Competence

- Includes mastery of cohesion and coherence whereby cohesion is achieved by the use of pronouns, conjunctions, synonyms, parallel structures, etc and coherence is achieved by the use of repetition, progression, consistency and organisation of meaning.

III. Sociolinguistic Competence

- Concerns with the knowledge of appropriateness in using the language across different sociolinguistics contexts.

IV. Strategic Competence

- Concerns with non-cognitive aspects to deal with communication breakdowns like self-confidence and preparedness to take risks.
- Strategies include paraphrasing, repetition, avoidance of words, modifications of messages, adapting registers and styles and structuring themes.

Additionally, functional competence concerns with the ability to use language that is appropriate for specific communicative tasks and situations like giving instructions, interviewing and negotiating (Bachman, 1990).

A much more recent communicative competence model entitled “*COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*” or CEFR (2020) refers to learner’s communicative competence to encouraging learners’ proficiency in communicative competence with “can do” descriptors. The framework also includes a range of levels from the most basic indicator (A1) to the most advanced indicator (C1). Thus, CEFR laid out its three basic components along with its sub-competences:

1. Linguistic Competence
 - General linguistic range
 - Grammatical control
 - Vocabulary range
 - Vocabulary control
 - Orthographic control
 - Phonological control
2. Sociolinguistic Competence
 - Sociolinguistic appropriateness
3. Pragmatic Competence
 - Coherence and cohesion
 - Thematic development
 - Turn-taking
 - Flexibility
 - Propositional precision
 - Fluency

Besides that, a recent study has developed a questionnaire to measure university students’ communicative competence by synthesising and choosing different models for each component of competencies (Nesic & Hamidovic, 2022). To illustrate, the researchers have examined which models to be used for each component of competencies as listed as follows:

1. Linguistic Competence - referring to Bachman (1990)
2. Sociolinguistic Competence - referring to Canale and Swain (1980), Bachman (1990), and CEFR (2001).
3. Discourse competence - referring to Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990).
4. Functional Competence - referring to Bachman (1990).
5. Strategic Competence - referring to Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990).

These 5 components were chosen and examined closely to assess students' communicative competence according to real-life situations and classroom contexts. This particular questionnaire can be essentially utilised in tertiary education to investigate the level of university students' communicative competence.

The research trend on communicative competence has mainly explored its importance in education, particularly its development in classroom teaching and learning, its uses in professional contexts and its aim in second language acquisition. The concept of communicative competence emerged in the 1970s as a response to the need for effective language use in real-life situations. Initially, language teaching focused on grammar drills and rote memorization, which did not help students communicate naturally (Savignon, 2017). Scholars like Hymes and Savignon advocated for a shift toward teaching language skills that included both grammatical knowledge and the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Over time, communicative competence became central to language education, emphasizing interactive learning and practical communication skills, and challenging traditional language teaching methods that emphasized grammar over real communication (Gutnyk et al., 2021; Shchur et al., 2022).

Past Research on Communicative Competence in Higher Education

CEFR has been majorly implemented in higher education to measure students' communicative competence. A study by Setyowati et al. (2022) investigated the students' communicative competence level based on the CEFR indicator and *The Test of English International Communication* (TOEIC) result. Due to the accuracy of the CEFR measurement and its compatible mapping with the TOEIC results, the researchers were able to suggest a more enhanced English language programme after the result revealed that the majority of the students were at Basic Level/A1. Therefore, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was established to improve student's communicative competence through the method of roleplaying, situation modelling, scholarly discussions, and debate with the usage of tools like audiovisual aids, authentic texts, and textual information (Shchur et al., 2022). Despite the prevalent awareness of the effectiveness of CLT, few studies have found that students are still more skilled in linguistic competence than in the conversational aspect of communication. A comparative and correlational study carried out by Tuan et al. (2017) to examine the level of grammatical competence and discourse competence from 5 universities in Vietnam revealed that students are more knowledgeable about the use and function of nouns, pronouns, and prepositions due to the teaching method that focuses more on linguistic rules than discourse competence.

A huge body of literature has confirmed the effectiveness of CLT in developing communicative competence among ESL learners. In a systematic literature review on CLT in modern classrooms, Salam & Luksfinanto (2024) found that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) greatly enhances learners' communicative skills and motivation, particularly in immersive settings. However, its effectiveness can differ based on classroom dynamics, cultural factors, and the teacher's level of expertise. A quantitative study by Shahid et al. (2022) examined ESL teachers' and learners' beliefs about CLT in developing communicative competence. They found that students are more interested in participating in communicative activities rather than listening to lecturers because they find it more enjoyable which also prepares them for professional purposes. In another systemic literature review by Qasseras (2023), CLT not only enhances communicative competence but also fosters critical thinking skills.

By engaging learners in real-life communication scenarios, CLT encourages them to analyze, evaluate, and respond thoughtfully, thereby developing their critical thinking abilities. This approach promotes problem-solving and decision-making, essential components of critical thinking, as learners navigate various communicative contexts. Studies revealed that ESL instructors can provide an encouraging and comfortable learning environment, while emphasizing the importance of sociolinguistic competence, via classroom interactions to develop students' communicative competence (Siti et al., 2022). This prompts students to have the initiative and willingness to learn and improve their communicative competence beyond the classroom and practice in authentic conversations.

Critical Thinking

According to The Foundation for Critical Thinking Organization (n.d), Socrates initiated the vision of critical thinking 2500 years ago and established the method of discerning any beliefs before accepting them. He claims that those who are in high power do not necessarily possess sound knowledge and rational thought, which in turn requires one to be truth-seeking. This tradition of critical thinking has continuously expanded ever since, introducing significant scholars such as John Dewey, Edward Glaser, Peter Facione, Robert Ennis, and Diana Halpern. Starting with Dewey (1934, as cited in Padmanabha, 2018), who defined critical thinking as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1910, p. 9).

Edward Glaser further expanded the concept into three principles namely attitude, knowledge, and skills that specified the said implications:

1. an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experience;
2. knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry and reasoning; and
3. some skill in applying those methods

(Glaser, 1942, p. 5)

This notion of critical thinking is supported by Facione (1990), Ennis (2016), and Halpern (2013) as they focused on the specifications of the skill and disposition aspects of critical thinking. Facione (1990) led a collaborative project called the American Association's (APA) Delphi with a panel of 46 experts from various fields to develop a unified definition of critical thinking. Thus, the APA framework has determined six core skills: *Interpretation, Evaluation, Analysis, Explanation, Inference* and *Self-regulation*.

Similarly, the conceptualisation of the skills aspect of critical thinking was further enhanced by Robert Ennis's definition of critical thinking. Ennis (2016) specifies the abilities and dispositions of an ideal critical thinker to be fully observant and open-minded to other points of view and be equipped with bases to make decisions. In fact, the skill aspect of critical thinking has also been majorly investigated in education (Halpern, 2013). This brings to the scope of the present study, which will only focus on the skills aspect of critical thinking as their importance has been discussed significantly in many industries. Few researchers have developed skill-based frameworks and taxonomies of critical thinking skills for educational purposes (Facione, 1990 & Bloom, 1956;). For example, Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives was introduced as a response to the need for more sophisticated learning outcomes, which include knowledge, comprehension, analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation.

Nonetheless, research indicated that students still lack the application of critical thinking skills in learning (Vero & Puka, 2018; Yuan et al., 2020). Vero and Puka (2018) studied students' perceptions of the European University of Tirana's role in encouraging and enabling students to think critically and found most students are only able to express their critical thinking several times but not often. Similarly, Yuan et al. (2020) revealed students' opinions regarding the significance of critical thinking for their educational pursuits. One of the participants pointed out that critical thinking was usually presented as a learning outcome in the course syllabi but was rarely fully expressed by the course instructors.

Research has shown that classroom activities can have a positive effect on ESL learners' critical thinking skills, and this knowledge is intended to motivate language teachers to use these activities in their teaching (Liang & Fung, 2021; Altay & Saracaloğlu, 2017; Vu & Nguyen, 2019). These studies have emphasized the effectiveness of group activities that involve discussing, answering questions, mental linking, and problem-solving. Vu and Ngen (2019) discovered the

positive effect of group work activities which revealed that critical thinking of analyzing, evaluating, hypothesizing, reasoning, comparing, explaining, questioning, inferring, interpreting, and testing were practiced. Additionally, a study by Zhou and Lin (2019) revealed that English major students are good at analyzing and inferring due to them having a good language foundation, a deep comprehension of the English language and its culture, and a substantial amount of experience in language learning in comparison to other foreign language majors.

The Relationship Between Communicative Competence and Critical Thinking Skills

For a long time, educators, researchers, employers, and policymakers worldwide have viewed developing critical thinking (CT) skills as a top educational goal and an important public need in today's democratic societies (Dumitru et al., 2018). CT plays a key role in improving everyday decision-making, problem-solving, supports intelligence and flexibility (Halpern & Dunn, 2021), and contributes to academic success (Ren et al., 2020). However, there has been very little research that specifically examined the relationship between all components of communicative competence and critical thinking. A few studies have examined communication skills and critical thinking particularly, by a study conducted by Mi-Ran and Su-Jeong (2016) who found a positive correlation between critical thinking and communication skills among nursing students.

Another study was carried out by Reyes and Cuzzamu (2022) who investigated the role of critical thinking and communication skills. The findings showed that critical thinking is an essential element in facilitating the communication process, as critical thinking allows individual to manage their thoughts before verbalizing them. Another recent study positioned critical thinking as a criterion variable of communication skills. Amin et al. (2023) employed a correlational research design to investigate the influence of critical thinking on communication and digital literacy skills. The result revealed that communication and digital literacy skills were significantly related to critical thinking skills. Although communication skills did not encompass the actual concept of communicative competence, there still exist parallel themes between them.

Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies have examined the connections between specific components of communicative competence and critical thinking skills. For instance, the relationship between linguistic competence and critical thinking skills was revealed by Hazim et al. (2021), who looked into the scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and their influence on higher-order skills. The result revealed that linguistic competence is highly correlated with critical thinking skills at the p level. 01 ($r=.727$), which indicates that linguistic competence is an influential cognition factor. Studies investigating the relationship between

discourse competence and critical thinking skills have been limited. One study has investigated the relationship between discourse competence and academic writing (Wang and Xie, 2022) in their case study approach. The researchers observed and analyzed the academic writing produced by EFL learners, particularly their language use and textual features, and found that successful academic writing has an obvious presence of cohesion and effective organization of paragraphs, which showcases aspects of discourse competence.

Similarly, a recent study by Nur et al. (2023) found that sociolinguistic competence had a statistically significant relationship with speaking proficiency among language learners. The study also included a qualitative approach to look into the learners' perception of their own sociolinguistic competence and speaking proficiency. Conclusively, the finding highlighted that language appropriateness plays a crucial role in fostering effective communication. Strategic competence presents another element in communicative competence and this was examined with reading comprehension (Ghafournia & Afghari, 2013). The research looked into how well Iranian EFL learners can understand and interpret written English texts by exploring their reading strategies (strategic competence) and reading comprehension. The study's findings revealed that strategic competence allows individuals to interpret reading tasks effectively due to the individual having three main abilities: planning, monitoring, and evaluating strategies.

Therefore, the lack of past research in investigating all components of communicative competence and critical thinking skills calls forth the present study to close the gap by investigating the relationship between communicative competence, namely linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and functional competence with critical thinking skills. The following are null hypotheses as reflected by the objective of this study:

Ho1: There is a relationship between linguistic competence and critical thinking skills.

Ho2: There is no relationship between discourse competence and critical thinking skills.

Ho3: There is no relationship between sociolinguistic competence and critical thinking skills.

Ho4: There is a relationship between functional competence and critical thinking skills.

Ho5: There is no relationship between strategic competence and critical thinking skills.

Ho6: There is a relationship between communicative competence and critical thinking skills.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1.0 below shows the conceptual framework adopted in the present study.

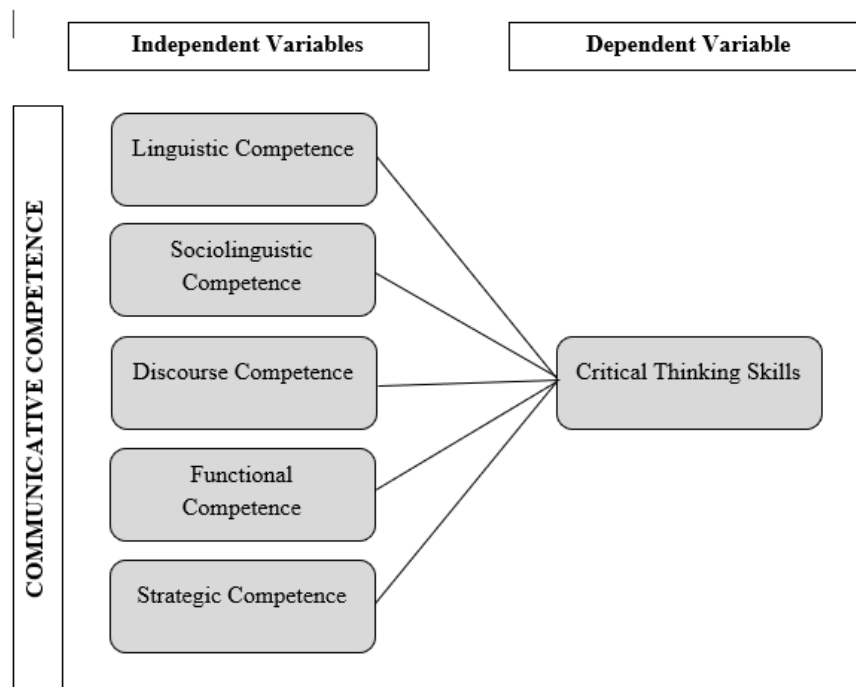


Figure 1.0: Components of communicative competence formulated by Nesic and Hamidovic (2022) to correlate with critical thinking skills formulated by Kobylarek et al. (2022).

Communicative competence encompasses the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across various contexts, involving a strong grasp of linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, functional, and strategic competencies. This study utilizes the recent framework developed by Nesic and Hamidovic (2022), which assesses each component of communicative competence specifically for university students. In parallel, critical thinking involves cognitive processes that enable comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of ideas or concepts. These processes, grounded in Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, serve as a basis for measuring adult critical thinking (Kobylarek et al., 2022). Consequently, this study adopts the communicative competence and critical thinking instruments from these two works, as both have been validated within educational settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a quantitative approach to investigate current trends in communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM English final-year students. A correlational research design was selected to examine the relationships between the independent variables

(linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, functional competence, and strategic competence) and the dependent variable (critical thinking skills). As Rahman (2020) notes, a quantitative approach is advantageous for observing patterns in social behavior across large samples using reliable methods.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to generalize findings to English final-year students, selecting participants with specific traits to address the research questions (Moniruzzaman & Mohammed, 2022). The sample was drawn from TESL, ECOM, and BENL students, with sample size calculations based on Tabachnick and Fidell's (2007) formula, ensuring a minimum of 90 participants. From a population of 330 final-year English students, 90 respondents were selected as representative. Data collection was conducted through online surveys distributed via WhatsApp, Instagram, and email to course lecturers in the selected programs.

The research instrument, adapted from Nestic and Hamidovic (2022) for communicative competence and Kobylarek et al. (2022) for critical thinking skills, consisted of nine sections: the study purpose, participant consent, demographic background, and six sections covering various competencies. The demographic section included gender and program options (ECOM, BENL, TESL). The survey used a six-point Likert scale for responses, following Ibrahim et al. (2015) for its interpretive clarity, with no neutral option to prompt more decisive responses.

The validity of the instrument was assessed through content and face validity. Content validity involved consulting the research supervisor to ensure clarity, relevance, and absence of bias in the language, meeting the scale's objectives (Lutfi & Ahmet, 2020). Face validity was established by the researcher and supervisor through evaluation of the instrument's alignment with objectives, readability, and participant comprehension. The instrument was piloted to confirm its reliability and applicability, following Junyong (2017), who emphasizes the importance of pilot studies for refining sample sizes and methodology. Reliability was tested through Cronbach's Alpha for each variable, verifying consistency across the six competencies:

1. Section 4: Linguistic Competence (10 items)

Some items include *"I am able to organize words in sentences based on syntactic rules."*

2. Section 5: Discourse Competence (3 items)

Some items include *"I am able to use language in certain contexts."*

3. Section 6: Sociolinguistic Competence (4 items)

Some items include *"I am able to combine language structures in order to achieve interrelatedness."*

4. Section 7: Functional Competence (4 items)

Some items include *“I am able to cope and express myself in a dead-end situation (fluency/fluent expression).”*

5. Section 8: Strategic Competence (4 items)

Some items include *“I am able to initiate communication.”*

6. Section 9: Critical Thinking Skills (22 items)

Some items include *“I like combining information from different texts.”*

The results of the Cronbach’s Alpha values for the variables indicate acceptable to strong internal consistency. Linguistic competence achieved an Alpha coefficient of 0.909, demonstrating high reliability. Sociolinguistic competence, with an Alpha of 0.665, indicates moderate reliability. Discourse competence, functional competence, strategic competence, and critical thinking skills recorded Alpha values of 0.707, 0.720, 0.784, and 0.815, respectively, all of which indicate acceptable to strong reliability. These values suggest that the instrument is suitable for measuring the variables in this study.

RESULTS

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between critical thinking skills and the various components of communicative competence. As shown in Table 2.0, critical thinking skills demonstrated significant, moderate correlations with all five competencies at the $p < .01$ level. Specifically, critical thinking skills were moderately correlated with linguistic competence ($r = .552, p < .01$), sociolinguistic competence ($r = .453, p < .01$), discourse competence ($r = .528, p < .01$), functional competence ($r = .578, p < .01$), and strategic competence ($r = .448, p < .01$). These findings indicate that as each of these communicative competencies increases, there is a corresponding moderate increase in critical thinking skills. Table 2.0 shows the guidelines for interpretation.

Table 1.0 Correlation table

		Mean_LC	Mean_SLC	Mean_DC	Mean_FC	Mean_SC	Mean_CTS
Mean_LC	Pearson Correlation	1	.643**	.699**	.639**	.417**	.552**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90	90
Mean_SLC	Pearson Correlation	.643**	1	.698**	.623**	.558**	.453**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90	90
Mean_DC	Pearson Correlation	.699**	.698**	1	.687**	.530**	.528**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90	90
Mean_FC	Pearson Correlation	.639**	.623**	.687**	1	.460**	.578**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90	90
Mean_SC	Pearson Correlation	.417**	.558**	.530**	.460**	1	.448**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90	90
Mean_CTS	Pearson Correlation	.552**	.453**	.528**	.578**	.448**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	90	90	90	90	90	90

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Table 2.0: Guidelines for Interpreting the Correlation and Coefficient

Degree of Correlation	“r” Value
Very low correlation	-0.01 to -0.20 and +0.01 to +0.20
Low correlation	-0.21 to -0.40 and +0.21 to +0.40
Moderate correlation	-0.41 to -0.60 and +0.41 to +0.60
High correlation	-0.61 to -0.80 and +0.61 to +0.80
Very high correlation	-0.81 to -1.00 and +0.81 to +1.00

Research Question 1: What is the level of communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM final-year English program students?

In determining the level of communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM English final-year students, the mean scores of the independent variables and dependent variables were produced. The following table shows the interpretation of the level of variables based on different mean scores.

Table 3.0 Thaoprom Best Principle score (Thaoprom, 2004)

Score's range	Level
1.00-2.33	Low scores
2.34-3.67	Average scores
3.68-5.00	High scores

Table 4.0 Mean score

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Mean_Critical Thinking Skills	4.64	.473	90
Mean_Linguistic	5.09	.593	90
Mean_Sociolinguistic	5.20	.544	90
Mean_Discourse	5.19	.513	90
Mean_Functional	5.11	.593	90
Mean_Strategic	5.25	.612	90

Table 4 above presents the mean scores for all independent and dependent variables, indicating high levels across each variable. Among the independent variables, linguistic competence showed a mean score of $M = 5.09$ ($SD = 0.593$), sociolinguistic competence $M = 5.20$ ($SD = 0.544$), discourse competence $M = 5.19$ ($SD = 0.513$), functional competence $M = 5.11$ ($SD = 0.593$), and strategic competence $M = 5.25$ ($SD = 0.612$). The dependent variable, critical thinking skills, also displayed a high mean score of $M = 4.64$ ($SD = 0.473$). These results suggest that IIUM English final-year students demonstrated the highest level of competence in strategic competence.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between communicative competence (linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, functional competence, strategic competence) and critical thinking skills among IIUM final-year English program students?

In determining the relationship between communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM English final-year students, the following table indicates the result of multiple regression analysis.

Table 5.0 Multiple Regression Analysis 1

Model	Standardized Coefficient Beta
Communicative competence (all components included)	.622 (.000)
R ²	.626
Adjusted R	.386
F Change	56.833
Significant F Change	.000

The results indicate a significant relationship between overall communicative competence and critical thinking skills, with communicative competence emerging as a strong predictor ($\beta = .622$, $p < .001$). The R-squared value ($R^2 = .626$) suggests that 62.6% of the variance in critical thinking skills can be explained by communicative competence in this study. Additionally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between individual

components of communicative competence and critical thinking skills, as detailed in the following table.

Table 6.0 Multiple Regression Analysis 2

Model	Standardized Coefficient Beta
Linguistic Competence	.265 (.038)
Sociolinguistic Competence	-.076 (.560)
Discourse Competence	.077 (.585)
Functional Competence	.314 (.013)
Strategic Competence	.194 (.064)
R ²	.649
Adjusted R	.387
F Change	12.216
Significant F Change	.000

As shown in Table 7, functional competence was found to be statistically significant in relation to critical thinking skills and emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .300$, $p = .022$). Linguistic competence also demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with critical thinking skills, serving as a strong predictor ($\beta = .265$, $p = .038$). In contrast, the other components of communicative competence—discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence—did not reach statistical significance and thus cannot be considered predictors of critical thinking skills in this study.

DISCUSSION

The first research question aimed to assess the level of communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM English final-year students. Findings revealed that students demonstrated high levels in both areas, which could be attributed to their sustained exposure to English throughout their studies, beginning from their foundation years. This consistent engagement likely included various classroom activities such as group discussions, role-play, storytelling, and presentations, all of which facilitate practical language use and interaction. Additionally, the role of lecturers appears to be an influential factor in students' communicative competence. Siti et al. (2022) emphasize that when ESL instructors foster a positive and interactive

learning environment, they encourage classroom engagement that supports the development of communicative skills. The structured yet dynamic nature of such environments allows students to practice and refine their language abilities in real-time contexts. Moreover, the high level of critical thinking skills observed among these students may stem from the communicative approach in their learning environment, which promotes skills essential for effective communication and comprehension. As English majors, they are trained to critically evaluate and select language elements, enabling them to construct meaningful, contextually appropriate sentences. This skill set not only reflects active critical thinking but also illustrates their ability to analyze and adapt language in diverse contexts. In conclusion, IIUM English final-year students exhibit strong communicative competence and critical thinking skills, which are advantageous for future employment prospects. Their training in both language and critical thinking could potentially position them for greater job opportunities, highlighting the importance of these skills in professional success.

The second research question explored the relationship between communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM English final-year students. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between overall communicative competence and critical thinking skills, supporting Amin et al. (2023), who concluded that strong communication skills positively impact critical thinking by enabling students to convey ideas clearly and articulate viewpoints coherently. Among the components, linguistic competence demonstrated a significant relationship with critical thinking skills. This aligns with Hazim et al. (2021), who found that linguistic competence, measured through TOEFL scores, correlated highly with critical thinking, suggesting it as a key cognitive factor in developing critical reasoning abilities. Similarly, functional competence was also significantly linked to critical thinking skills. This is likely because functional competence involves abilities such as explaining, describing, arguing, and questioning—all of which require critical evaluation and thoughtful language use, thereby closely aligning with critical thinking processes. On the other hand, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies showed no significant relationship with critical thinking skills in this study, which may be due to other contextual factors. For instance, Nur et al. (2023) found that sociolinguistic competence was significantly related to speaking proficiency, indicating that sociolinguistic skills may be more relevant to verbal communication effectiveness than to critical thinking.

Additionally, Wang and Xie (2022) demonstrated that discourse competence plays a key role in academic writing, where effective topic-building and sentence cohesion are emphasized.

Similarly, strategic competence has been shown to correlate with reading performance (Ghafournia & Afghari, 2013), suggesting that high strategic competence enables a more effective interpretation of reading tasks rather than directly influencing critical thinking. Considering these findings, it may be more effective to treat communicative competence as a single, unified independent variable rather than separating it into multiple components. Communicative competence operates holistically, with each component complementing the others to achieve effective communication. For example, while linguistic competence enables understanding and speech, it may not ensure appropriateness in diverse social contexts. Thus, true communicative competence requires balanced proficiency across all five areas: linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, strategic, and functional competencies. Therefore, this study supports three research hypotheses: the relationships between linguistic competence, functional competence, and overall communicative competence with critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The level of communicative competence and critical thinking skills among IIUM English final-year students is high, as the mean scores recorded for both variables were above 4.00. It is assumed that the classroom activities and the pedagogical method carried out by lecturers in IIUM may have helped increase the final-year students' communicative competence. Additionally, English majors are ESL learners who generally may have been exposed to the language in various social, academic, and professional contexts, facilitating the enhancement of communicative competence. Interestingly, this study has confirmed that communicative competence is significantly related to critical thinking skills among English final-year students as ESL learners.

Several implications of the study have been identified. There is a definite need to reaffirm that communicative competence works as one unified concept. This can help the research field to conduct studies focusing on all parts of communicative competence and investigating it with other dependent variables. Studies highlight the importance of treating communicative competence as an integrated skill set rather than isolated components. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) argue that linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies are interdependent and should be taught together to achieve effective communication. Moreover, the findings of this study revealed a better understanding of the current trends of IIUM English final-year students' communicative competence and critical thinking skills. It serves as valuable information for the students themselves, IIUM lecturers, and the policymakers of education programs. Several recommendations can be made for communicative competence as a guideline for ESL learners.

Though ESL learners have been exposed to language learning that puts more emphasis on grammatical competence, ESL learners can improve their sociolinguistic competence by constantly involving themselves in various social contexts to make themselves aware of many aspects of sociolinguistic appropriateness. Shrum and Glisan (2015) found that situational learning, such as role-play and simulations, improves students' ability to use language flexibly and critically. Next, they should also understand how to convey their ideas concisely by expanding their vocabulary and practicing active listening.

Future studies could enhance the credibility and generalizability of findings by expanding the sample size and including first-year students to allow for a comparative analysis of communicative competence and critical thinking skills across academic levels. Additionally, comparisons could examine variations between male and female students, as well as among students in BENL, TESL, and ECOM programs. Including diverse demographic variables, such as socioeconomic background or prior language exposure, could further enrich the analysis. To deepen understanding, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups could provide a more comprehensive view of students' communicative competence. Conducting longitudinal studies would also be valuable to track changes in communicative competence and critical thinking over time, offering insights into how these skills develop through the course of university studies. A qualitative approach could further illuminate lecturers' perspectives on students' communicative abilities and explore students' own perceptions and practices. Such a study would enable a comparison of lecturer and student views, highlighting potential similarities and differences in their perspectives on communicative competence.

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