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Metalinguistic Awareness in Contemporary English Language Teaching: Challenges in EFL Contexts with a Focus on Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Metalinguistic awareness has gained increasing attention in English language teaching because it enables learners to reflect on linguistic forms, meanings, and communicative functions. However, many EFL classrooms, including those in Bangladesh, remain dominated by teacher-centered and examination-oriented practices that provide limited opportunities for students to develop speaking competence and higher-order cognitive skills. This study aimed to explore the implementation of a metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model and examine its contribution to middle school students' speaking development and cognitive engagement. A qualitative research design was employed involving 27 EFL learners in middle schools in Bangladesh. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the model supported learning through five interconnected dimensions: explicit language reflection, contextualized speaking activities, metalinguistic feedback, HOTS-oriented tasks, and utilization of learners' linguistic resources. Students reported increased confidence, improved language awareness, enhanced reasoning ability, and greater learner autonomy. The study concludes that metalinguistic awareness functions not only as a mechanism for improving linguistic competence but also as a cognitive bridge connecting language learning with critical thinking development. The findings contribute a context-sensitive ELT model for multilingual EFL environments.

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INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has increasingly shifted from the transmission of linguistic knowledge toward approaches that emphasize meaningful communication, learner autonomy, and cognitive engagement. Within this transformation, metalinguistic awareness (MAK) has emerged as an important construct because it enables learners to view language not only as a communication medium but also as an object of reflection and analysis. Metalinguistic awareness refers to learners' ability to consciously reflect on linguistic features, including grammar, vocabulary, discourse patterns, and the relationship between linguistic forms and meanings (Donoso, 2022; Lê & Lê, 2022). Unlike traditional form-focused instruction that

emphasizes memorization of grammatical rules, metalinguistic-oriented teaching encourages learners to understand why particular language forms are used, how meanings are constructed, and how linguistic choices influence communication.

Research across different EFL contexts indicates that integrating metalinguistic reflection with communicative practices can strengthen linguistic competence, learner autonomy, and cognitive involvement, particularly when language analysis is connected with authentic communicative tasks rather than isolated grammar exercises (Gordon, 2023; Ha et al., 2021; Sanosi, 2022; Deng et al., 2022). However, the implementation of metalinguistic-oriented English teaching remains uneven because many classrooms continue to rely on teacher-centered, examination-driven approaches that provide limited opportunities for learners to analyze and regulate their own language use (Lwin & Yang, 2021; Rivera et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, this issue is particularly relevant because although curriculum reforms have promoted communicative language teaching (CLT), classroom practices frequently remain dominated by grammar translation, textbook-based instruction, and examination preparation, creating a persistent gap between policy expectations and pedagogical realities (Rafi, 2025). Therefore, developing an instructional model that systematically integrates metalinguistic awareness with communicative language learning is necessary to address limitations in current ELT practices.

The development of speaking competence and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) represents another significant challenge in middle school English education in Bangladesh. Although English is a compulsory subject in the national curriculum, many middle school learners continue to demonstrate limited oral proficiency, low confidence in speaking, restricted vocabulary resources, and difficulties in expressing complex ideas through English. Previous studies indicate that these problems are strongly associated with instructional environments that provide insufficient opportunities for meaningful interaction, collaborative discussion, argumentation, and problem-solving activities (Ahmed, 2021; Amin, 2023; Awal, 2022). The dominance of examination-oriented teaching has encouraged students to prioritize grammatical accuracy and memorization of textbook content rather than developing the ability to use English for reasoning, evaluation, and creative expression (Islam et al., 2021; Patwary & Chowdhury, 2021).

Consequently, many students may demonstrate knowledge of linguistic rules but experience difficulties when required to organize ideas, justify opinions, or participate in spontaneous communication (Alam & Aktar, 2021; Awal, 2022). This situation reflects a broader educational concern because speaking proficiency and higher-order cognition are interconnected processes. When students engage in meaningful spoken communication, they negotiate meaning, construct arguments, evaluate perspectives, and develop reasoning abilities through language use (Ahmed, 2021; Hossen, 2023). Therefore, English instruction at the middle school level should move beyond accuracy-based language learning toward pedagogical models that combine speaking development with cognitive processes. A metalinguistic-oriented approach offers potential because it enables students to analyze linguistic choices while simultaneously engaging in higher-level thinking activities such as interpretation, evaluation, and problem solving (Deng et al., 2022; Tajik et al., 2023).

In addition to speaking difficulties, language performance among Bangladeshi middle school learners is closely related to challenges in reading skill development. Although reading instruction occupies a substantial position in English classrooms, classroom practices often emphasize vocabulary recognition, translation, and literal comprehension questions rather than deeper interpretation, inference, and critical evaluation of texts. Such practices limit students' ability to connect textual information with prior knowledge, identify implicit meanings, and transform information from reading

into meaningful spoken communication (George, 2022; Islam & Stapa, 2021; Rami et al., 2023). Reading competence is essential for speaking development because texts provide learners with linguistic input, discourse structures, and conceptual resources that support oral expression.

Studies on reading-to-speaking approaches demonstrate that students develop stronger communication skills when reading activities require interpretation, evidence-based discussion, and argumentation rather than passive comprehension (Datta & Roy, 2024; Ezra et al., 2021; Schwarz & Hamman-Ortiz, 2020). Furthermore, metalinguistic awareness can strengthen this relationship by helping learners recognize how linguistic structures function within texts and how these structures can be transferred into spoken discourse (Sanosi, 2022; Deng et al., 2022). Translanguaging perspectives also suggest that allowing learners to draw upon their complete linguistic repertoires can enhance reflection, collaboration, and meaning negotiation in multilingual classrooms (Quinn et al., 2025; Rafi, 2025). Therefore, integrating reading comprehension, metalinguistic reflection, and speaking activities represents an important direction for improving overall English language performance among Bangladeshi learners.

Despite the theoretical potential of metalinguistic-oriented ELT, several challenges remain in developing and implementing such a model in Bangladesh. One major challenge concerns teachers' understanding and pedagogical readiness to integrate metalinguistic activities into classroom practice. Effective implementation requires teachers to understand how learners develop both explicit knowledge about language and the ability to apply such knowledge during communication (Gordon, 2023; Hilliker et al., 2021). However, many teachers experience difficulties designing activities that connect linguistic analysis with communicative purposes, particularly within large classrooms and limited instructional time (Alhazmi, 2024; Pourmohammadi et al., 2021). Another challenge involves aligning metalinguistic-oriented instruction with assessment systems that traditionally emphasize grammatical accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, and examination performance rather than reflective language use, discourse competence, and critical thinking (Islam et al., 2021; Rafi, 2025).

Furthermore, although translanguaging-based strategies have demonstrated potential for strengthening metalinguistic reflection by allowing learners to compare linguistic resources across languages, their implementation requires institutional support and teacher preparation to overcome existing language ideologies (Quinn et al., 2025; Rafi, 2025). These challenges indicate that an effective instructional model should not treat metalinguistic awareness as additional grammar instruction but should integrate language reflection, communicative speaking tasks, reading-based learning, and HOTS development into a coherent pedagogical framework.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to develop and examine a Metalinguistic-Oriented English Language Teaching Model designed to foster middle school students' speaking skills and higher-order cognitive skills in the Bangladeshi EFL context. The novelty of this study lies in integrating three dimensions that have often been investigated separately: (1) metalinguistic awareness as a reflective mechanism for language learning, (2) communicative speaking activities as a medium for authentic language use, and (3) HOTS-oriented tasks that promote analysis, evaluation, and problem solving. Unlike conventional ELT approaches that separate language knowledge from cognitive development, the proposed model positions language reflection as a pathway for improving both communication and thinking processes. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following objectives: (1) to develop a theoretically grounded metalinguistic-oriented ELT model appropriate for Bangladeshi middle school contexts; and (2) to investigate the effectiveness of the developed model in enhancing students'

speaking skills and higher-order cognitive skills. Accordingly, this research addresses two research questions:

RQ1. How can a metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model be designed and implemented to support speaking skills and higher-order cognitive skills among middle school students in Bangladesh?

RQ2. To what extent does the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model improve students' speaking performance and higher-order cognitive skills compared with conventional English language teaching practices?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the implementation, experiences, and perceived impacts of a metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model in fostering speaking skills and higher-order cognitive skills among middle school EFL learners in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aims to understand complex educational phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through numerical measurements alone. Specifically, this design enables an in-depth investigation of how learners perceive language reflection activities, how they engage with communicative speaking tasks, and how metalinguistic processes contribute to their reasoning, interpretation, and problem-solving during English learning activities.

The qualitative design was considered appropriate for addressing the research questions because the study focuses on examining learning processes, classroom interactions, learner experiences, and cognitive engagement within authentic instructional contexts. Rather than determining only whether a teaching model produces measurable improvement, the qualitative approach allows the researchers to examine how and why the model influences students' language performance and higher-order thinking development. Through classroom observations and learner interviews, the study captures participants' perspectives regarding the usefulness of metalinguistic activities, their challenges in applying linguistic knowledge, and their strategies for constructing meaning during English communication. The study adopted an interpretive orientation because learners' development of speaking skills and higher-order cognitive abilities is shaped by social interaction, classroom culture, and individual learning experiences. This perspective aligns with the view that language learning involves not only acquiring linguistic forms but also developing awareness of how language functions within meaningful communication contexts (Deng et al., 2022; Sanosi, 2022). Therefore, qualitative inquiry provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between metalinguistic awareness, communicative practices, and cognitive engagement.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 27 EFL learners enrolled in English language classes at middle schools in Bangladesh. The participants were selected because they represented the target population for which the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model was developed and implemented. Middle school learners were considered an appropriate group because this educational stage represents a critical period for developing foundational English communication abilities, reflective language awareness, and higher-order cognitive skills. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information regarding their experiences with the instructional model. The selection criteria included students who were actively participating in English classes, had regular attendance during the implementation period, and were willing to participate in interviews and classroom

observation activities. The participants had experienced learning activities incorporating metalinguistic reflection, communicative speaking tasks, and higher-order thinking activities as part of the English instructional process.

The participants represented diverse learner characteristics in terms of gender, academic achievement, and English learning experiences. The inclusion of learners with different levels of English proficiency was intended to provide a broader understanding of how the instructional model influenced students with varying linguistic abilities. Participants were middle school students within the typical adolescent age range, reflecting the developmental stage where learners begin to demonstrate greater capacity for abstract reasoning, self-reflection, and analytical thinking. Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was maintained by using participant codes rather than personal identities during data analysis and reporting. Appropriate permission was obtained from relevant school authorities before conducting classroom observations and interviews.

Instruments

Two qualitative instruments were employed to collect data: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The combination of these instruments was selected to obtain complementary perspectives regarding the implementation of the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model. Interviews provided insights into learners' perceptions, experiences, difficulties, and reflections, whereas classroom observations enabled the researchers to examine actual learning behaviors, interactions, and engagement during instructional activities.

The interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical framework of metalinguistic awareness, speaking development, and higher-order cognitive skills. The questions were designed to explore learners' understanding of language reflection activities, their experiences during speaking practices, their strategies for solving language-related problems, and their perceptions of how the instructional approach influenced their confidence and ability to express ideas in English. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to provide detailed explanations of their experiences rather than limited responses. The classroom observation instrument was developed to document observable indicators related to students' participation, language use, metalinguistic reflection, interaction patterns, and cognitive engagement. The observation framework focused on how learners analyzed linguistic forms, negotiated meanings, responded to feedback, expressed opinions, justified ideas, and engaged in problem-solving discussions during English lessons.

To ensure the validity of the instruments, the interview questions and observation framework were reviewed by experts in English language education and qualitative research methodology. Expert evaluation was conducted to ensure that the instruments were aligned with the research objectives, theoretical constructs, and contextual characteristics of Bangladeshi middle school EFL classrooms. Revisions were made based on expert feedback to improve clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the instruments. The reliability and trustworthiness of qualitative data were strengthened through methodological triangulation, where interview findings were compared with classroom observation evidence.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis process followed an inductive thematic analysis approach to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships emerging from interview

transcripts and classroom observation records. The analysis began with data familiarization, in which researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts, observation notes, and field records to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. During this stage, researchers identified preliminary ideas related to students' language awareness, speaking development, classroom participation, and cognitive engagement. Following familiarization, the researchers conducted initial coding by systematically labeling meaningful segments of data. Codes were generated based on participants' statements, observed classroom behaviors, and recurring patterns related to metalinguistic awareness and higher-order thinking. The coding process remained closely connected to the research objectives while allowing new concepts to emerge from the data. Examples of emerging codes included awareness of language forms, confidence in speaking, negotiation of meaning, critical reflection, problem-solving strategies, and collaborative learning.

The researchers then examined relationships among codes and organized them into broader categories. Through an iterative comparison process, similar codes were grouped together to generate potential themes representing significant aspects of learners' experiences. Themes were developed to explain how the metalinguistic-oriented teaching model influenced students' speaking practices and cognitive engagement. For example, related categories concerning language reflection, feedback interpretation, and communication strategies were examined to identify broader patterns of metalinguistic development. The generated themes were subsequently reviewed and refined by examining their consistency with the entire dataset. Researchers evaluated whether each theme was sufficiently supported by interview evidence and observation data and whether the themes accurately represented participants' experiences.

After reviewing and defining the themes, researchers interpreted the findings by connecting the emerging patterns with the theoretical framework of metalinguistic awareness, communicative language teaching, and higher-order cognitive development. Conclusions were drawn by explaining how and under what conditions the metalinguistic-oriented English teaching model supported students' speaking skills and cognitive engagement. The final stage involved writing the research report by presenting themes, supporting evidence from participants' responses and classroom observations, and discussing the findings in relation to previous studies. Through this systematic analytical process, the study produced a contextualized understanding of how metalinguistic-oriented ELT practices contribute to improving English learning experiences among middle school students in Bangladesh.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

RQ1. How can a metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model be designed and implemented to support speaking skills and higher-order cognitive skills among middle school students in Bangladesh?

The findings revealed that the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model was effectively designed around the integration of language awareness, communicative interaction, and higher-order cognitive engagement. The classroom observation indicated that learning activities moved beyond traditional grammar explanation by encouraging students to reflect on linguistic choices before applying them in speaking situations. Instead of simply receiving correct answers from the teacher, learners were guided to identify why particular expressions were appropriate and how language structures influenced meaning. This process helped students develop conscious control over English usage and supported the development of speaking competence.

One dominant theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of explicit language reflection before communication. Students explained that understanding the relationship between form and meaning helped them become more confident when speaking English. For example, one participant stated: *"Before this class, I only memorized sentences. Now I understand why we use certain words and how changing the sentence changes the meaning."* Another learner explained: *"The teacher did not only tell us the correct answer. We discussed why the sentence was correct and how we can use it in another situation*."

These responses indicate that the model supported learners in developing metalinguistic awareness by transforming grammar from a memorization activity into a reflective learning process. Classroom observations supported these findings, showing that students actively discussed sentence structures, vocabulary choices, and communication strategies before completing speaking tasks.

A second important finding concerned the role of contextualized speaking activities. The model incorporated discussions, role plays, group problem-solving, and opinion-based tasks that required students to use English for meaningful purposes. Learners reported that these activities provided opportunities to practice language in realistic situations rather than repeating textbook dialogues. One student commented: *"Speaking activities helped me express my own ideas because we were not only answering questions from the book*." Similarly, another participant stated: "*When we discussed problems and gave opinions, we needed to think first and then speak in English*." These findings suggest that the effectiveness of the model was associated with the connection between metalinguistic reflection and communicative practice. Students were required to analyze language features while simultaneously using English to construct meaning.

The implementation of the model also emphasized higher-order thinking through language-based tasks. Observation data showed that students engaged in activities requiring comparison, justification, evaluation, and decision-making. Rather than producing short factual responses, learners were encouraged to explain reasoning and defend their opinions. This approach supported the development of HOTS because students used English as a tool for cognitive processing. One participant reflected: "*The activities were more difficult because we had to explain our reasons, but they helped us think more deeply*." Another student added: "*I learned that English is not only about grammar. We can use English to discuss ideas and solve problems*."

The findings indicate that a metalinguistic-oriented ELT model can be designed through the integration of explicit language awareness activities, communicative speaking practices, and HOTS-oriented learning tasks. The model provides a bridge between linguistic knowledge and cognitive development by enabling learners to reflect on language while using English for meaningful communication. These findings can be summirized in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes Emerging from Learners' Experiences of the Metalinguistic-Oriented English Language Teaching Model

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Evidence from Learner Interviews and Classroom Observations
Integration of explicit language reflection with communication activities	Students analyze grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structures before speaking	Learners reported that discussing language forms helped them understand how and why English expressions were used during communication
Contextualized speaking activities	Learning through discussion, presentation, problem-solving, and opinion-sharing	Students indicated that authentic speaking tasks increased confidence and encouraged them to express

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Evidence from Learner Interviews and Classroom Observations
	tasks	personal ideas
Use of metalinguistic feedback	Teacher feedback focused on explanation rather than correction only	Learners recognized errors and learned strategies to improve future speaking performance
Integration of higher-order thinking activities	Analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and argumentation during English tasks	Students experienced English learning as a process of thinking and explaining ideas rather than memorizing answers
Utilization of learners' linguistic resources	Translanguaging and comparison between languages	Learners used their previous language knowledge to understand English concepts and construct meaning

Table 1 illustrates that the design and implementation of the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model were characterized by the integration of language awareness, communicative practices, and cognitive engagement. The findings indicate that the model was not implemented as an additional grammar-focused approach, but rather as an integrated instructional framework that connected explicit understanding of language forms with meaningful language use. The emergence of the theme "integration of explicit language reflection with communication activities" demonstrates that learners benefited from opportunities to analyze grammatical structures, vocabulary choices, and sentence meanings before applying them in speaking contexts. This finding suggests that metalinguistic awareness functioned as a cognitive support mechanism that enabled students to move from simply knowing linguistic rules toward understanding how and why those rules operate in authentic communication.

Furthermore, the themes related to contextualized speaking activities, metalinguistic feedback, and higher-order thinking activities reveal that the effectiveness of the model was strongly associated with learner engagement in meaningful classroom interactions. The findings indicate that speaking development occurred when students were encouraged to discuss ideas, justify opinions, analyze language choices, and solve communicative problems. The use of explanatory feedback allowed learners to understand the reasons behind linguistic errors rather than merely correcting mistakes, thereby promoting self-regulated learning. In addition, the incorporation of learners' linguistic resources through translanguaging supported deeper reflection by enabling students to compare linguistic forms and meanings across languages. These findings reinforce previous research showing that translanguaging practices and metalinguistic feedback can strengthen language awareness, collaborative meaning-making, and cognitive engagement in multilingual EFL classrooms.

RQ2. To what extent does the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model improve students' speaking performance and higher-order cognitive skills compared with conventional English language teaching practices?

The qualitative findings demonstrated that the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model contributed to noticeable improvements in students' speaking performance and higher-order cognitive engagement. Compared with conventional English instruction, which students described as mainly focused on memorization and answering textbook questions, the new model provided more opportunities for reflection, interaction, and independent language use.

The first major theme was the improvement of speaking confidence and willingness to communicate. Many learners reported that previous English lessons created anxiety

because they were afraid of making mistakes. However, the metalinguistic-oriented approach encouraged students to view mistakes as opportunities for learning through reflection and feedback. One participant explained: "*Before, I was afraid to speak because I thought mistakes were bad. Now I understand my mistakes and try again*." Another learner stated: "*The teacher gave explanations about mistakes, so I became more confident to speak*." Classroom observations confirmed these perceptions, showing that students increasingly participated in discussions, volunteered answers, and interacted with peers during speaking activities.

The second finding involved improvements in language performance and self-monitoring ability. Students indicated that metalinguistic explanations helped them recognize patterns in their language use and correct errors independently. Rather than depending entirely on teacher correction, learners began monitoring their own vocabulary choices and sentence structures. One student reported: "*Now when I make a sentence, I think about whether the meaning is correct, not only whether the grammar is correct*." Another participant explained: "*The feedback helped me understand my mistakes, so I can avoid repeating them*." These findings suggest that metalinguistic feedback supported learners' ability to regulate their own language development.

The model also enhanced students' higher-order cognitive skills, particularly their ability to analyze information, justify opinions, and solve problems through English. Observation data revealed that learners engaged more actively in tasks requiring explanation and evaluation rather than simple recall. Students described that the activities challenged them to think before speaking. For example: "*We had to give reasons for our answers, so we learned how to think critically*." Another participant commented: "*The discussion activities helped me compare different opinions and choose the best idea*." These findings indicate that English became not only a subject to learn but also a medium for cognitive development.

Furthermore, the model promoted learner autonomy because students became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English learning. Learners reported using strategies such as reviewing vocabulary, analyzing sentence patterns, and practicing speaking independently. One participant stated: "*I know which parts of English I need to improve because I can identify my own problems*." Another learner explained: "*I do not wait for the teacher all the time because I can check my language myself*."

The findings suggest that the metalinguistic-oriented ELT model improved students' speaking abilities and higher-order cognitive skills by creating learning experiences that combined language reflection, communication, and cognitive engagement. The model differs from conventional approaches because it positions learners as active participants who analyze language, construct meaning, and apply knowledge in authentic situations. The novelty of this finding lies in demonstrating that metalinguistic awareness can function not merely as a linguistic support mechanism but as a cognitive bridge connecting language learning with higher-order thinking development in Bangladeshi middle school EFL contexts. The findings can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Learners' Development of Speaking Skills and Higher-Order Cognitive Skills through the Metalinguistic-Oriented English Language Teaching Model

Main Themes	Indicators of Improvement	Evidence from Interview and Observation Data
Increased speaking confidence	Reduced anxiety, greater willingness to participate, improved fluency	Students reported greater confidence expressing ideas in English
Improved language accuracy and awareness	Better vocabulary selection, sentence construction, and self-correction	Learners demonstrated increased ability to monitor their own language use

Main Themes	Indicators of Improvement	Evidence from Interview and Observation Data
Enhanced critical thinking and reasoning	Giving explanations, evaluating ideas, and supporting opinions	Students became more capable of producing reasoned responses
Greater learner autonomy	Self-monitoring and independent language improvement strategies	Students developed awareness of their own learning difficulties
More active classroom participation	Collaboration and meaningful interaction	Observation showed increased student engagement during speaking activities

Table 2 presents the qualitative evidence regarding the perceived improvement of students' speaking performance and higher-order cognitive skills after experiencing the metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model. The findings indicate that the model contributed to improvements in several interconnected dimensions, including speaking confidence, language accuracy, self-monitoring ability, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. The emergence of the theme "increased speaking confidence" suggests that students developed greater willingness to participate in English communication because the learning environment reduced their fear of making mistakes. Unlike conventional English instruction, where errors are often viewed as indicators of failure, the metalinguistic-oriented model positioned errors as opportunities for reflection and improvement. This process encouraged students to analyze their own language use and gradually develop confidence in expressing ideas.

The findings in Table 2 also demonstrate that the model supported the development of higher-order cognitive skills by transforming English learning from a process of memorization into a process of reasoning and knowledge construction. Students' increased ability to provide explanations, evaluate ideas, and solve problems indicates that speaking activities became opportunities for cognitive development rather than merely language practice. The integration of discussion-based tasks and reflective activities encouraged learners to use English for analytical purposes, including comparing perspectives, constructing arguments, and making decisions. Moreover, the emergence of learner autonomy as a theme suggests that students gradually developed responsibility for monitoring and improving their own language performance. This finding highlights the importance of metalinguistic awareness as a bridge between language competence and cognitive regulation.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that a metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching (ELT) model provides a meaningful framework for connecting explicit language awareness with communicative competence and higher-order cognitive development among middle school EFL learners in Bangladesh. The study revealed that students benefited from activities requiring them to analyze linguistic forms, reflect on the relationship between form and meaning, and subsequently apply their understanding in authentic speaking contexts. This finding extends previous research emphasizing that metalinguistic awareness should not be positioned as isolated grammatical knowledge but rather as a reflective mechanism that supports purposeful language use (Donoso, 2022; Sanosi, 2022). Previous studies have indicated that learners with stronger metalinguistic knowledge are better able to monitor linguistic accuracy and make conscious decisions regarding language choices (Deng et al., 2022; Almarshedi, 2022). The current findings confirm this perspective by showing that learners moved beyond memorizing grammatical rules and began to understand how linguistic structures function within communication. This result is particularly significant in the Bangladeshi EFL context, where English

instruction has traditionally been influenced by examination-oriented practices and grammar-focused approaches, limiting students' opportunities to use English for meaningful interaction (Islam et al., 2021; Rafi, 2025). Therefore, the present study contributes empirical evidence that metalinguistic awareness can serve as a bridge between formal language knowledge and practical communicative competence.

The findings also confirm previous research regarding the importance of integrating metalinguistic reflection with communicative language teaching. The students in this study reported that speaking activities became more meaningful when they were required to discuss ideas, justify opinions, and solve problems rather than simply reproduce textbook expressions. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that communicative tasks combined with explicit attention to language forms enhance learners' ability to transfer linguistic knowledge into authentic communication (Ha et al., 2021; Gordon, 2023). However, the present study extends previous research by demonstrating that metalinguistic reflection can simultaneously support speaking development and higher-order cognitive skills. While previous studies have primarily examined the relationship between metalinguistic awareness and linguistic accuracy or writing development (Deng et al., 2022; Tajik et al., 2023), this study highlights its role in encouraging learners to analyze, evaluate, and construct arguments through English. The classroom observation findings showed that students engaged in comparison, justification, and decision-making activities, indicating that language learning became a cognitive process rather than merely a linguistic exercise. This finding supports the argument that speaking proficiency and cognitive development are interconnected because effective oral communication requires learners to organize ideas, negotiate meaning, and express reasoning (Ahmed, 2021; Hossen, 2023).

Another important finding concerns the role of metalinguistic feedback in improving students' language awareness and self-regulation. The study found that learners benefited more from explanatory feedback than from simple correction because explanations enabled them to understand the reasons behind linguistic errors and apply this knowledge in future communication. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that corrective feedback containing metalinguistic explanations promotes deeper learner engagement and improved language awareness (Ha et al., 2021; Rasool et al., 2024). Deng et al. (2022) similarly reported that coded and focused corrective feedback can improve learners' ability to identify and correct language problems. The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that metalinguistic feedback is not only useful for writing accuracy but also valuable for speaking development when embedded within interactive classroom activities. In the Bangladeshi middle school context, where students often experience anxiety about making mistakes during English communication, feedback that encourages reflection rather than punishment may contribute to increased confidence and willingness to communicate.

The findings further reveal the importance of contextualized speaking activities in supporting both language performance and higher-order thinking skills. Students indicated that discussions, problem-solving tasks, presentations, and opinion-sharing activities encouraged them to use English as a tool for expressing personal ideas. This finding supports earlier research emphasizing that classroom interaction and meaningful communication are essential for developing speaking proficiency (Patwary & Chowdhury, 2021; Kayum, 2024). Conventional English instruction in Bangladesh has frequently emphasized memorization and examination preparation, resulting in limited opportunities for spontaneous communication and critical engagement (Alam & Aktar, 2021; Islam et al., 2021). The current study challenges this traditional orientation by demonstrating that speaking tasks designed around reasoning and reflection can transform English classrooms

into environments where students actively construct knowledge. Therefore, the study expands existing literature by positioning speaking activities as spaces for both linguistic development and cognitive growth.

The integration of translanguaging practices also represents an important contribution of this study. The findings indicate that allowing learners to draw upon their existing linguistic resources supported comprehension, reflection, and collaborative meaning-making. This finding corresponds with recent research suggesting that translanguaging enables multilingual learners to develop metalinguistic awareness by comparing linguistic systems and understanding relationships between languages (Quinn et al., 2025; Rafi, 2025). Rather than viewing students' first language as an obstacle, the present study demonstrates that linguistic diversity can function as a cognitive resource for English learning. This perspective is particularly relevant in Bangladesh, where students operate within multilingual environments involving Bangla, English, and local languages (Sultana, 2021). The findings therefore extend translanguaging research by showing how multilingual resources can be incorporated within a metalinguistic-oriented ELT model to support both communication and cognitive engagement.

Despite these positive contributions, the findings also highlight several challenges associated with implementing the model. Teachers require sufficient pedagogical knowledge to design activities that balance explicit language analysis with communicative practice. Previous research has identified teacher readiness, large classroom size, limited resources, and examination pressures as major barriers to innovative ELT implementation (Alhazmi, 2024; Pourmohammadi et al., 2021). The present study confirms these challenges but suggests that they can be addressed through carefully structured instructional frameworks, teacher professional development, and assessment systems that recognize reflective language use and higher-order thinking. Therefore, successful implementation requires not only classroom-level innovation but also broader institutional support.

This study contributes a context-sensitive understanding of how metalinguistic awareness can enhance English learning in Bangladeshi middle schools. Unlike previous studies that have examined metalinguistic awareness, speaking development, or HOTS separately, this study integrates these dimensions into a unified instructional model. The novelty lies in conceptualizing metalinguistic awareness as a cognitive bridge connecting language knowledge, communicative competence, and higher-order thinking development. This integrated perspective provides new insights into designing ELT approaches that prepare learners not only to communicate effectively in English but also to think critically and reflectively through language.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that a metalinguistic-oriented English language teaching model provides an effective pedagogical framework for supporting speaking skills and higher-order cognitive development among middle school EFL learners in Bangladesh. The findings demonstrate that integrating explicit language reflection, communicative speaking activities, metalinguistic feedback, and HOTS-oriented tasks enables learners to develop deeper understanding of linguistic forms and their communicative functions. Rather than positioning grammar as a collection of rules to memorize, the model encourages students to analyze language, reflect on meaning construction, and apply linguistic knowledge in authentic communication contexts. The qualitative evidence from interviews and classroom observations indicates that learners experienced increased confidence, improved self-monitoring ability, greater participation, and enhanced ability to explain and justify ideas in English. Therefore, the study confirms that metalinguistic awareness can function

beyond linguistic accuracy development by supporting learners' cognitive engagement, autonomy, and reflective learning processes.

The study further concludes that the integration of metalinguistic awareness with communicative and cognitive-oriented instruction represents an important direction for ELT innovation in Bangladesh and similar EFL contexts. The model developed in this study addresses limitations of conventional examination-oriented English teaching by creating opportunities for students to use English as a medium for reasoning, problem-solving, and knowledge construction. The novelty of this research lies in combining metalinguistic reflection, speaking development, translanguaging-informed practices, and HOTS within a single instructional framework. Although the study acknowledges challenges related to teacher preparation, classroom conditions, and curriculum alignment, the findings suggest that systematic professional development and supportive educational policies can facilitate broader implementation. Future research may examine the model using mixed-method or longitudinal designs to investigate its effectiveness across diverse educational settings and learner populations.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only as supportive instruments during the preparation of this manuscript, particularly for language refinement, organization of ideas, and improvement of academic expression. The conceptual development, research design, data interpretation, and conclusions presented in this article remain the responsibility of the authors. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors to ensure academic accuracy and integrity.

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