

## Why Historical Thinking Skills was not there?

**Rosy Talin**

Faculty of Psychology and Education  
University Malaysia Sabah  
Sabah, Malaysia

**Abstract.** This qualitative study was done to understand the reasons for the absent of historical thinking skills (HTS) from the teaching of history in the classroom. The participants were four experience history teachers teaching in four secondary schools. Interviews and observations were carried out to collect the data needed. The findings showed these teachers incorporated two of the skills; understanding chronology and exploring the evidence. These skills are known as the lower level of HTS. The higher level of HTS; interpretation, imagination and rationalization, were superficially found in the teaching of two of the participants. The reasons for the absent of the higher level of HTS as identified from the data were the excessive used of the textbook, the focus of the teaching was to prepare students for examination and teachers' unawareness of HTS. Teachers need to be exposed with the concept of HTS to enable HTS to be incorporated in the teaching of history in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Historical thinking skills; students thinking skills; history teaching

### **Background**

The Malay Language subject was all the while the only compulsory subject to be passed in the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination, a government examination seated by upper secondary schools students in their final year. However in 2013 the government decided to include History subject as another compulsory subject to be passed in the examination. Since then the history teaching has been discussed and improved. One of the improvements taken was to emphasize more on nurturing students' thinking skills because history has been seen as a subject that could stimulate students' thinking as it deals with events in the past. In fact, the initiative to encourage thinking among the students was already stated clearly in the history curriculum since 2003 but it did not show the way thinking should be integrated in the teaching of history in the classroom. The curriculum listed two types of thinking; the Historical Thinking Skills (HTS) and the Creative and Critical Thinking Skill (CCTS). The latest improvement showed an additional of another thinking skill that is the Higher Order Thinking Skill (HOTS). Although it seems there are three different thinking skills to be incorporated in the teaching and learning of history, the

objective is unison; to encourage students to use their thinking skills to understand the historical facts in relation to today's and future's events. When students have acquired the ability to think historically, they are able to understand the meaning of the past actions and events, and are able to relate, explain and predict the present and future activities (Miki, Kojiri and Seta, 2015; Lovorn, 2014). Reaching such ability requires students to go through the process of CCTS and HOTS. This article sees these three terms as interrelated and complimented each other.

### **Literature review**

Yeager and Foster (2001) see HTS as "a powerful tool for understanding history" (p. 13), therefore, it is a vital intellectual skill (Bain, 2000) that needs to be incorporated into the teaching. In general, HTS is a form of cognitive process. To acquire HTS, students need to think critically and creatively to "increase the probability of a desirable outcome" (Fahim & Masouleh, 2012). Paul (1994) identified two types of critical thinking. First, the weak sense of critical thinking which means the students have learned the skills but have not applied them in real situation. Second, the strong sense of critical thinking where students not only have learned the skills but also incorporated those skills in their life's activities. Students with strong sense of critical thinking acquired both HTS and HOTS.

The history curriculum listed five skills of HTS, understand chronology, explore historical evidence, interpret the evidence, imagine, and rationalize historical events. Understanding chronology is developed as students learn about the chronology of the past events inclusive of the date, the place, and the people involved in the events. This knowledge helps students to understand the historical facts. Exploring historical evidence engages students in the work of historians. Students evaluate primary and secondary sources to confirm and to get greater understanding of why events in the past transpired in certain ways (Hogue, 2000). Having known the evidence, students are encouraged to interpret the events based on the evidence they have investigated. In this activity, students identify similarities and differences and other perspectives to assist them in comparing or contrasting the events of the past. To give students more understanding of certain historical events, imagination is required. Students put themselves in the events being studied to release empathy towards the people at the time of the events. It encourages students to appreciate what they are having now. Finally, rationalizing the historical facts means giving thoughtful reasoning whether to accept or to reject any possibilities of the recurrence of the events in the present or future. Students who think historically are able to explore the complex and abstract ideas in history, to analyze how people use time, space, change and continuity (Centre for Curriculum Development, 2003).

The incorporation of HTS in the teaching and learning of history in the classroom nurtures students to link, rearrange and develop previous information with new information and to determine "what to believe, what to do, create a new idea, a new object, or an artistic expression, make a prediction and solve a

non-routine problem” (Lopez and Whittington, 2001). Students with these abilities indicate they have acquired HOTS.

HTS is not a generic skill. It has to be learned and practiced. Since HTS is emphasized in the curriculum, teachers need to incorporate HTS in their teaching. However, in my previous articles I have shown that the teaching of history is still very much traditional in approach (Rosy, 2013, 2014, 2015). This approach did not allow the incorporation of any thinking in the teaching. Therefore, this study presents factors contributing to the absent of HTS in the history teaching and learning.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to identify factors of the absent of HTS in the history classroom. To meet the purpose, the qualitative approach was chosen as the appropriate approach because the data necessary for this study lied with the history teachers in the classroom. Therefore, classroom observation was the primary strategy for data collection and followed by interview with each of the participating teacher to understand the meaning of his/her activities during the observed teaching and learning process. These two forms of data collection were also meant to triangulate the data as to improve the data validity.

Several conditions were determined to select the participants of this study. Those were the purpose of the research, the resources available and the questions being asked (Patton, 1990); informative and information rich (Tellis, 1997); small in number because this study was not seeking statistical significance, and purposeful (Tuckett, 2004). Besides those conditions, there was another additional condition to select the participant for this study. The participants must be trained history teachers with at least five years of teaching history experience. It was believed teachers with this amount of teaching experience were expert in the subject-content and rich with information. The number of participants was not pre-determined as the data saturation (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) determine the ending of the data collection process. Finally, there were four experienced history teachers from four different secondary schools involved in providing the data for this study.

The data collection procedure started with a brief familiarization interview with the teacher. The purpose of this interview was to get to know the teachers, to explain the purpose and procedures of the study, to get the teacher’s consent to be the participant of this study and to set a date for the classroom observation. With the participants’ consent, in all of the observation sessions a video was set up at the back of the class to capture the teaching and learning process. The recording was meant to back up the researcher’s field notes and for double checking during the data analysis. After each observation session the participants were interviewed to understand the meaning behind their activities and action during the observation.

The data were analysed simultaneously. After each observation and interview session, the field note was studied and the interview was transcribed,

read, and coded. All categories found in the first data collection process were brought to the participant in the second round of data collection process for verification. This technique was called as member checking and it was done to ensure the validity of the data collected (Merriam, 2001). Once the data for the first participant was saturated, the next participant will be studied. The process is repeated until all the data is saturated. The data collection process ended when there was no more new data coming out from further observation and interview of the other participants. The data for this study were saturated after four participants were observed and interviewed. The data altogether inclusive of ten field note observations and thirty four interview transcriptions.

### **The Finding**

Data collected from the observations of the teaching of history showed four interesting findings. Firstly, two out of the five skills of HTS had been discovered incorporated in the teaching of history, though the way those skills were incorporated were at the surface level. The two skills were understanding chronology and explore historical evidence. The data showed teachers emphasised on understanding the chronology of the historical events. Students were required to understand and memorize the events based on the chronology. To convince the chronology was correct; students were encouraged to explore the textbook to find the evidence. These skills were done regularly in the teaching of history. Warren (2007) agreed the teaching of the events chronology was important and teachers were right in emphasizing it. However, this was the lower level of the HTS. Consequently, students were not exposed on relating the historical events or facts with the present and future events. They were encouraged to memorize the past events in isolation from the present and future events. Clearly, it does not eliciting students' HOTS.

The second finding was each of the participating teachers in this study delivered the content of the topic according to the textbook. The textbook was heavily referred by both teachers and students to get the evidence and points, to give comprehensive explanation, or to ask and to answer the questions. This finding was not come as a surprise as other findings has also found that in the teaching of history the textbook was the popular reference to be used (Karaagac & Threlfall, 2001).

The interviews data showed such practice was triggered by the participating teachers' intention to prepare students for the year-end examination. It gave them a peace of mind because they have completed the syllabus within the given time frame, thus, their students were well prepared for the year end examination.

*"This is for the examination purpose. They can master the content and pass the examination especially the SPM (Malaysian certificate of Education). This is to fulfil our educational system" (T1S1, int. 3:190-192)*

*"The syllabus requires the use of the textbook in the teaching. It helps students to understand the points." (T4S4, int 1:10-11)*

*"The textbook teaches how to do the right explanation. It also contains pictures, answers' model, website address, and exercises with answers attached. Everything. Complete." (T4S4, int 2, 18-22)*

Another important discovery on the heavily usage of the textbook was to ensure students have better achievement in the examination. The achievement was very important as it normally used to measure teachers' performance.

*"If the students did not understand the topics according to the textbook, I scared they might not be able to answer the examination. The effect will get back to the teacher." (T3S3, int 1:106-108)*

The third finding was, none of the participating teachers realized that they had begun to inculcate HTS, though, it was the lower skills and at a very surface level. When asked whether they have heard or known HTS, their answers either they never heard of it, or it was another teaching strategy. Without a proper understanding of HTS it was impossible for teachers to incorporate the skills in their teaching.

*"No, I don't have any idea of what it is." (T1S1, int.1:90)*

*"ah....never heard of it. There was no exposure about it. I think it might be an approach to teach history easier (T3S3, int. 2:84,86)*

Effort to incorporate the higher level of HTS was noticed in two of the teachers' teaching practice. This was the fourth important finding in this study. These teachers were observed trying to connect the historical facts with examples from students' lives. Relating the historical facts with examples in students' life was a way to encourage a higher level of HTS (Warren, 2007). The effort was noticed from the questions these teachers asked during the teaching.

*"Do you know what 'tajau' ( a big Chinese vase) was for in the olden years?" (T3S3, Obs. 2)*

*"Mount Kinabalu...it was believed the spirit of the dead will go and stay on the top of the mountain. Do you think it has some resemblance with the Jahiliah beliefs?" (T4S4, Obs. 3)*

These questions required students to interpret, to imagine and to rationalise the possible answers because the answers could not be found in the textbook. However, in this particular sessions, these teachers did not probing further the students' thinking. Instead, they provided the answer and showed the relationship between the facts with the students' life. As such the students' higher level of HTS was not elicited. This is the fourth finding where teachers were unable to stimulate students' thinking because the questioning strategy was inappropriate.

The main reason for the missing of probing question was again because of these participating teachers' unaware of the HTS. They did not realize that they were actually trying to incorporate the higher skills of HTS when relating the historical events with the contemporary examples. For them it was meant to inculcate the patriotic and good values, other important components that need to be inculcated in the teaching of history. Such unawareness had made these teachers relate the historical facts with the events in the students' lives spontaneously and occasionally in the classroom.

*"I try to inculcate value. If I get the chance I just inculcate the value. No need to wait until the teaching is done." (T4S4, int. 3:17-18)*

## **Discussion**

Based on the finding presented above, the excessive used of the textbook left no rooms to refer to other reference books which might stimulate discussion. Wholly relying on the textbook hinders the incorporation of HTS in the teaching. Drake and Brown (2003) whom has suggested the use of three documents in the teaching of history argued using a single document will not equip students to think historically. Depending on one single text would not enable students to interpret, imagine and rationalize the facts.

The absence of sensitivity to the events happening around us had ended up with the teaching merely based on the facts alone. This has limited teachers' ability to stimulate students to make interpretation, imagination and to rationalize the facts (Hunt, 2000). Stimulation of students' thinking can be done through appropriate questioning strategy which has been proven able to elicit students' thinking (Yang Yang, 2015). Another suggestion to incorporate thinking in the teaching is to adopt the inquiry teaching strategy where students are encouraged to learn history through searching for the information, understand the information and applying the information in their situation (Baron, 2013).

These teachers unawareness of the HTS in their teaching was due to the lack of exposure on HTS incorporation in the teaching. Teachers' shortage of knowledge of HTS has influenced teachers' readiness to teach the skills (Zahara and Nik Azleena, 2007; Warren, 2007; Vieira, Tenreiro-Vieira, & Martin, 2011). Though it was said that two of the HTS were in the teaching of these teachers but it was done unintentionally, therefore, it was superficially carried out. As such, it was not a surprise to found only the low level of HTS in the teaching of history. According to Choy and Cheah (2009) teachers' lack of understanding of the requirement needed to inculcate thinking among students had made teachers to think that they have encouraged students' thinking. However, the teachers were only emphasizing on students' comprehension of the topic being taught.

Due to this, very little effort had been made to inculcate the higher skills of HTS; to interpret, to imagine and to rationalize. This finding was in line with Pattiz (2004) suggestion that in the classroom the teaching of how to think critically was overlooked. As we are living in a different environment today, therefore school children should be equipped with thinking skills that enable them to compete in the job market. They need to be prepared as problem solver, thoughtful decision maker, and independent thinkers as there are the qualities being looked by employers today (Noor, 2008).

To inculcate the higher level of HTS, a well-planned teaching is required. HTS is not something that springs automatically from someone's psychological development. Teachers have to be trained (Wineburg, 1999; Doreen, 2004; Warren, 2007) and equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills then only they could carefully plan the process of incorporating the skills so it happens simultaneously with the teaching of the historical facts.

The higher level of HTS could be incorporated in the teaching by asking question using the higher level of Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) taxonomy, using more than one reference book to see the variety of points presented (Drake and Brown, 2003), and increase teacher's sensitivity to see how events happening around could be related to the historical events and how historical events had influenced the present and possibly future events. Students' thinking should be elicited to encourage their HOTS (Preus, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

The initiative to incorporate HTS in the teaching of history was not fully successful. There was only the low level of HTS noticeable in the teaching of these participating teachers' teaching. It was hampered by these teachers concern to well-prepared their students for the year end examination. Though effort to incorporate the higher HTS was there but due to teachers' unawareness of HTS and lack of exposure on its incorporation in the teaching had hindered the effort. Research is needed to find solutions to help teachers incorporating HTS in their history classroom teaching. It should start with study that focuses on how teacher training institutions can prepare themselves to produce teacher trainees that innovative enough to teach thinking in the classroom.

For thinking skills to be well incorporated in the teaching and learning of history, relevant parties should work hand in hand to prepare and equip these teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills. Besides, more study should be given in teaching and learning environment that gives trust to the students to lead their own study. Such environment will give room for an effective inculcation of HTS in the teaching and learning process.

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