



## Historical Thinking Skills – The Forgotten Skills?

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### Abstract

This article explains the discipline structure of History subject in Malaysia. The discipline consists of five concepts: Historical Inquiry, Historical Information Gathering, Historical Thinking Skills (HTS), Historical Explanation, Understanding History and Empathy. Among the five concepts, this article discusses HTS which has been specifically emphasizes in the curriculum. Inclusive in the discussion is the meaning of HTS and the skills it covers - Understanding Chronology, Discovering Historical Evidence, Interpretation, Imagination and Rationalize Facts; its present application in the teaching of history in the classroom, the possibility of its inculcation in the teaching, and the significance of HTS if taught to the younger generation.

Keywords: Historical Thinking Skills, History Teaching, History Learning, Historical Inquiry

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## **1. Introduction**

The awareness of the importance of history in one's life has opened up a new dimension in the Malaysian education system. History subject was upgraded from an elective subject in 1989 to a core subject and today this subject is a compulsory subject to be passed in the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination, which is a compulsory examination for students in form five (aged 17). One of the goals of this subject is to equip students with the knowledge of the historical events in the country, thus, a sense of national pride can be possessed by these youngsters. To obtain these goals the History curriculum has drawn the discipline structure for this subject to be observed in its teaching.

## **2. The Discipline Structure of History Subject**

This discipline consists of six compulsory elements which are needed to be considered in the teaching of the subject. Those elements are the historical inquiry, historical information collection, historical thinking skills (HTS), explanation of the historical facts, understanding history and empathy.

### *2.1. Historical inquiry*

To study History means to take effort to find the truth about lives in the past. Thus, a history teacher should implement the principles of the 5W 1H. This principle discloses the What, When, Who, Where, Why and How of an event. By embracing this principle in the teaching of History students are encouraged to discover the answers by researching, gathering up and exploring evidences found around them. These activities are called the historical inquiry.

### *2.2. Historical information gathering*

History teachers should expose students with the procedures of obtaining historical information. Such procedures support the answers to the questions posed to them. Students should be made aware of the fact that history source can be divided into primary and secondary source, and the methods involved in obtaining the relevant sources. These historical sources include oral and written material, artifacts, photos and other evidences that can be applied to explain the past issues. In the process of collecting historical information, these sources are essential to be investigated.

### *2.3. Historical thinking skills (HTS)*

Normally, the historical information collected is usually complex, abstract and irrelevant in today's situation. HTS is needed to give meaning to this kind of information. HTS is a cognitive process which, when owned by the students can provide an understanding of the complex, abstract and irrelevant facts and provide its significance to life today. This skill is vital to be incorporated in the teaching of History.

### *2.4. Historical explanation*

After mastering the HTS, students are able to analyze the historical facts and are able to explain the importance of the past facts to the present and future life. Proficient in explaining the historical facts can certainly make the learning of history more meaningful, thus, interesting.

### *2.5. Understanding history*

The meaning of understanding history is students are able to understand the way of life in the past by the application of the HTS. Such understanding inspires students to better understand and experience the past and the changes that are taking place around them. This increases the students' empathy and their understanding of what is happening now in relation with the past.

### *2.6. Empathy*

After the five elements above are met in the teaching of History, students are expected to be empathetic towards the country. Having empathy determines the level of students' thinking and students' moral and patriotic values. Such values can help students to see from many perspectives how the past events could support the current development of the country. Students who have empathy can evaluate the events with an open mind, tolerance and matured in response to their environment.

Based on the discipline structure explained above, it is clear that the goal of History subject in Malaysia is to produce empathetic citizen. According to this curriculum, the goal can be obtained through the inquiry teaching method. Today, the history teachers' role in teaching History is not only teaching the historical facts in the way they used to do (Talin, 2014a). Our history teachers are required to teach using the inquiry method which encourages students to experience each of the disciplines presented above specially the HTS.

## **3. Historical Thinking Skills (HTS)**

HTS is a cognitive process to explore and learn the complex and abstract historical facts (Curriculum Development Centre, 2003). According to Yeager and Foster (2001: 13) HTS is a "dominant skills in understanding history". These skills help students to discern the significant from the insignificant facts. This process cannot be seen, but it can be felt when it exists (Cercadillo, 2006). For Bain (2000), HTS is an intellectual skill. Thus, it should be incorporated in the teaching of history to achieve the goal of history education in this country. HTS is also known as historical reasoning (Boxtel and Drie, 2004), historical interpretation (Dilek and Yapici, 2005), and historical inquiry (Doreen, 2004). According to the Curriculum Development Centre (2003) HTS will bring awareness to the students the importance of history in today's life and their attitude and thinking can be improved.

There are five specific skills in HTS.; Understanding chronology, discovering historical evidence, making interpretation, imagination and rationalize the historical facts (Curriculum Development Centre, 2003).

### *3.1. Understanding chronology*

Understanding chronology involves activities to encourage students to learn and understanding the chronology of past events based on the layout of the date, the place, the actors and the events. This skill helps students to answer four of the W in the 5W 1H principle that is the When, Where, Who and What. Understanding chronology allows students to acquire the historical facts.

### *3.2. Discovering historical evidence*

Having acquired the historical facts, students are expected to discover evidence to proof the correctness of the facts. There is abundant evidence that can be searched of. Discovering historical evidence involves the skill to identify primary and secondary sources. These are the sources to be studied and investigated, in order to look for the correctness of the facts encountered in the history. In fostering this skill history teachers need to find, read and analyze

materials related to the topics to be taught before providing such materials to the students. This procedure suggests the use of the textbook alone is no longer enough to equip students this skill.

### *3.3. Making interpretation*

Making interpretation is a skill trying to offer meaning to the historical facts that have been proven authentic by the evidence. This skill is to answer the last W in the 5W1H principle, which is the Why. By providing proofs for the existence of the historical event students' understanding can be increased. History teachers should train and encourage students to give reasons for the occurrence of any historical event based on the evidence obtained using the previous skill.

### *3.4. Imagination*

Bridging the historical facts requires the skill of imagining things. This skill encourages students to put themselves in the events being studied and allows them to visualize themselves in the event. This exercise release students' empathy towards the people at the time of the event. So, they are able to appreciate what they are having now. The imagination skill helps students to answer the 1H of the 5W1H principle that is the How.

### *3.5. Rationalize facts*

Having imagining themselves in the past events, students should be able to rationalize the existence of the historical facts. This skill demonstrates students' ability to make sound judgment of the events and thoughtful linkages between the historical events with the present and future events. It gives students the whole meaning of the events in the past, and its implication to todays and future events. Rationalize skill enables students to solve problems based on the historical events associated with todays and future events.

Each of the skills explained above is interrelated. Mastering of all the skills is significance to acquire HTS. History teachers nowadays should understand the meaning of HTS to help them in its application in the history teaching.

Warren (2007) divided HTS to two categories, the HTS basic and the HTS advance. The HTS basic inclusive of students are reading textbooks or other materials provided by the teachers to understand the chronology and to discover the evidence to proof the accurateness of the historical facts. The HTS advance requires students to interpret the facts, to imagine the situation and to rationalize the past. Students who have acquired HTS are able to apply and relate past events to the present and future events based on their own experience and understanding (Bain, 2000). Mastery of HTS enables students to understand the meaning of history in present life and to instill in them the moral and patriotic values.

HTS is a combination of five skills that need to be acquired to make the history subject interesting and meaningful to the life of the students. These skills offer the answer to the 5W 1H principle. Teachers should travel with their students to understand the historical chronology, explore the evidence, interpret the facts based on the evidence, and use imagination to have empathy and rationalize its meaning in order to understand the meaning of history in todays and future life. This is the instrumental to develop the younger generation to mould them holistically as enshrined in the Malaysia National Philosophy of Education;

“Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and

capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, society and the nation at large.”

#### **4. HTS in the Teaching of History**

Zahara Aziz and Nik Ismail Nik Azleena (2007) studied the preparation of teachers in fostering HTS in the teaching of History. They were looking at the elements of teacher preparation. These elements are inclusive of the procedural knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge about teaching materials, and the management attitudes towards the organization. The results showed teachers responded positively to the implementation and application of the HTS. However, the finding of teachers’ procedural knowledge across the five skills and teachers’ readiness to use HTS is at the moderate level.

A case study carried out by Talin (2014b) showed that only one history teacher had carried out the basic HTS in her teaching. The reason given for the lack of HTS incorporation was the teacher’s lack of exposure and understanding of the HTS, thus, hinder them from implementing it in the history teaching.

Overseas studies were also shown similar findings. Warren’s (2007) survey of history teachers in Michigan in 2004 on the application of HTS found that textbooks were the most commonly used among teachers. Only some of these teachers encouraged their students to use other historical resources or materials. However, these teachers did not encourage their students to compare the perspectives of historians found in the materials. This finding indicated that the HTS nurtured in these teachings was also the HTS basic.

Dilek and Yapici (2005) also conducted a study on the teaching of history. The study was first conducted in 2002 to 2003 and involved six grade classes in a primary school in Istanbul. Their study consisted of two phases. In the first phase, the researcher wrote a story about a historical story. In the second phase, the historical story was taught and passed on to the students. The teaching had been recorded using a video. The study found that activities such as interpretation, imagination and rationalize the historical facts have been carried out. These activities were carried out through a dialogue between teacher and student, student to student, teacher to student groups and students produced their creative work while in class. In their study the used of the HTS advance was noticed.

In line with the HTS situation in the teaching of History around the world and the fact that there are history teachers who have never heard of HTS although HTS has long been in the history curriculum in Malaysia, this shows that the HTS is not emphasized in the teaching of history. For sowing and nurturing HTS in the teaching of history, all parties involved with teachers training and development should prepared appropriate training on HTS for history teachers to provide them with the knowledge and skills to help them stimulate students to use HTS while learning history. These are the challenges need to be encountered by all teachers who are teaching history.

#### **5. The Application of HTS in the Teaching**

HTS is not a skill that acquired naturally by students. It is not a generic skill. It must be learned and mastered by teachers before they can prepare students toward its mastery (Warren, 2007; Wineburg, 2000). There are some arguments about the best approach to incorporate HTS in teaching. Most history teachers still use teacher-centred approach in teaching history. Explanations of the substance found in the textbook and note writing on the part of the students are the common activities seen in the history classroom. These activities are not helping in terms of encouraging students to use HTS

One of the activities allows students to develop their thinking skill is questioning. Felder and Brent (2003) and Fink (2004) suggest teachers ask higher level questions. Such questions lead students to think inside and outside the box. Their suggestion shows one of the ways to

cultivate HTS in teaching is through questioning techniques. This suggestion has also been supported by Cooper and Dilek (2007); Cole and Barsalau (2006); McGonigal (2005), and Boxtel and Drie (2004). According to Fisher (1998) questioning skill is an important component in every lesson. Questioning encourages interaction between teachers and students as well as the interaction among the students themselves. During the interaction, students develop their ability to think critically. For this reason history teachers are needed to master the skills of questioning so that they are able to promote the application of HTS in their instruction.

There are various types of questions that can be asked of the students. Among the most common are open and closed questions (Fisher, 1998). Open-ended questions do not require teachers to offer the answers. Rather, the students are encouraged to think to provide the solutions. The closed questions are more focused on the facts in the textbook. Teachers are more often using the closed questions because they want to test students' understanding and students' short term memory of the topics taught.

For the application of HTS in the teaching teachers have to acquire the skills of questioning as presented in Bloom's Taxonomy (1965). This taxonomy categorized questions into six levels; the knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation levels. Of the six levels, the knowledge and understanding levels are classified as lower order thinking. These questions are usually intended to test students' understanding of the topics that have been learned. To answer such questions students are only encouraged using their recalling skill. This is the types of question commonly asked by teachers. In terms of HTS, these levels of question encourage the application of the HTS basic. The other remaining levels, the application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, are the highest level of question. These questions are meant to test students' higher thinking skills such as to interpret, to imagine and to rationalize the facts learned. If such questions are asked by teachers, then the HTS advance is incorporated into the students.

White (2002) gave additional ideas to Bloom's taxonomy to be in line with the need to effectively incorporating HTS in the teaching of history. Table 1 shows the Bloom's Taxonomy and White's additional ideas. When it is analyzed, it can be seen that Bloom's Taxonomy was designed to assess students' understanding of the facts presented in the teaching and learning process. White's additional ideas are not only emphasizing on students' understanding of the facts, but also promoting students' thinking skills. By implementing White's ideas the effort to incorporate HTS advance in the teaching can be upheld.

Table 1. Bloom's Taxonomy and White's Ideas

Level	Bloom's Taxonomy	White's Additional Ideas
Knowledge	Scan and recall the things that have been learned before. Keywords: Reflect, state, label, list, match, name, read, produce, record, select, highlight, define and write.	Not limited to ideas, events, names and date. Make interpretation whether historians generally agreed/objected.
Understanding	Understanding the meaning of the materials. Keywords: classify, convert, describe, discuss, anticipate, explain, generalize, give examples, illustrate, restate (based on their own interpretation), to formulate, to detect and understand.	Increasing a person's ability to assess the implications, effects and chronology.
Application	Using previous knowledge in the current situation, to solve problems, and to get the best alternative. Keywords: use, demonstrate, calculate, complete, illustrate, show, relate, change, classify, construct and operate.	To see the chronology of historical events and its difference.

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Analyses	Distribute the pieces of information, to evaluate the relevance of the information in making conclusions, identifying motives or causes, making inferences, and / or finding evidence to support generalizations. Keywords: analyze, categorize, compare, distinguish, relate, differentiate, prioritize, identify and divide.	To clarify cause and effect, "Why and What will happen". To enhance students' intellectual skills by requiring them to make their own analysis to criticize others' analysis.
Synthesis	Creatively used previous knowledge and skills to produce something new. Keywords: adapt, predict, collaborate, combine, connect, organize, modify, create, design, develop, write, gather, and plan.	Issuing ideas from general knowledge. Organizing and separating facts, and building general conclusion from the facts.
Evaluate	Making an assessment based on personal value / view, produce end products with a particular purpose, regardless whether it's a right or wrong decision. Keywords: Evaluate, compare, distinguish, conclude, criticize, decide, defend, interpret, and provide justification.	To assess the validity of the argument. To assess the conclusions to see whether certain historical developments are desired.

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Adopted from White, P.L (2002).

In order to apply White's ideas in the teaching, it is important for history teacher to plan strategies and techniques for questioning. Wilen (1991) proposes some basic techniques of asking questions;

- i. Plan all questions in the preparation of lesson plans.
- ii. Questions should be clear and specific to increase the probability of getting the right answer.
- iii. Adapt questions to the level of students' ability to improve the probability of answering and thinking correctly
- iv. The question must be logical and structured to enhance student learning and thinking.
- v. The question must consist of low and high levels. Low level question is determined based on the understanding of the questions and students' thinking abilities. Higher level questions required students to think critically and creatively to acquire the answer.
- vi. Guide students' response and answer to clarify, expand, and elevate their thinking to a higher level.
- vii. Give students time to think as to encourage a high level of thinking.
- viii. Questions preferably encourage participation from all students.
- viv. Encourage and motivate students to respond using their own words.

Questioning should involve both teacher and students. If teachers are dominating the questions it means the teachers are unsure of the subject content. If students are asking the questions, teachers will be able to assess the students' understanding of the topic being discussed (Haydn *et al.*, 2001). It is important for the two parties to be involved equally in the questioning activity.

Drake and Brown (2003) provide another strategy to increase students' knowledge of the historical facts and students' ability to think. Both authors suggest teachers to employ more than one source of teaching material. They recommended the employment of three documents. These documents are called first document, second document and third document. The first

document is the main material used in the teaching of history. It can be the textbook. The teacher should guide the discussion by asking multilevel questions to stimulate students' thinking. The second document either supporting or disputing the content of the first document. It is necessary to have more than one material in the teaching so students may challenge to use their thinking ability to arrive at the decisions. The third document is the document brought by the students in the class which they perceived as the primary source to the topic of discussion. Drake and Brown stressed that students need to find their own documents related to the topic of discussion. The teacher's role is to ask questions that encouraged the use of HTS. It is also suggested that students are encouraged to have a group discussion as discussion motivates students to improve their process of thinking. According to Lee and Ahsby (1999), students are able to achieve a high level of understanding through group discussion. In addition, the problem-solving process can also be accelerated through discussions which encouraged students' critical thinking skills (Akinoglu, 2003, cited in Cooper and Dilek, 2004).

The application of the two activities mentioned above in the teaching of history would help the inculcation of the HTS. However, it depends on the history teachers readiness to use the activities.

## 6. Conclusion

The effort to inculcate HTS in the teaching of history can be obtained if the teachers are willing to learn HTS and ready to emphasize it in their history teaching. Doing this means teachers have to change their way of teaching history. If teachers are continuing relying only to the textbook in their teaching and use explanation in delivering the facts, we only can instill the HTS basic to the students. It would not help students to have empathy as intended by the curriculum. Indeed the implementation of HTS requires a lot of sacrifice in the part of the teachers themselves. They have to sacrifice their time to learn, to plan the lesson well and to carry out the teaching in the classroom. More importantly they have to sacrifice the culture they are in because to emphasize HTS in the teaching requires cultural revoke.

The application of HTS in the teaching would not be materialized meaningfully if the teachers are not exposed and understood HTS. Effort should be given to educate teachers to perform teaching activities that would encourage the use of students' HTS. The challenges for history teachers today are not only to communicate the facts about the past events, but also to make those facts alive in the students' lives today (Lowenthal, 2000). Teachers' ability to take the challenges would nurture students to become empathetic. Without empathy, the younger generation will tend to forget and will not realize the significance of the historical events taught.

The intention to implement HTS implicates the awareness to prepare students to meet with the needs of the 21st century education. One of the skills being emphasized is the thinking skills which enable students to deal with complex problems in their lives. The 21st century education prepares younger generation to think creatively and critically to address the world's rapid and constant changes. According to Fisher (1998) the key of successful education is succeeding in educating and preparing students to think critically, creatively and effectively.

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