Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Overview

The use of languages cues in the Malaysian University English Test or MUET can be used to promote higher–order thinking skills in MUET. MUET is the acronym for the Malaysian University English Test which was started as a requirement by the Malaysian Examinations Council (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia) in 1999 for students entering tertiary education in public universities in Malaysia.

Higher–order thinking skills involves a series of mental activities such as critical thinking, analysis and problem–solving. It is in fact a further extension or rather a higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy which involves higher-order thinking skills. According to Alice Thomas and Glenda Thorne (2001), it is "thinking on a higher level than memorising facts or telling something back to someone exactly the way it was told to you."

Hence, higher–order thinking skills along with language cues can be used to train students in the MUET syllabus. It is hoped that if this can be achieved by doing so in this manner, our Malaysian students should not face any problem in their strife to attain a certain level of proficiency in the English Language. "When there is a will, there is a way" – so the saying goes. If this spirit can be incorporated in every student, this uphill task can be easily overcome and this is what is seen in this study. The present generation of Malaysian children are very intelligent and achieving this goal should not pose a problem.

1.2 MUET in General

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language from Year 1 in the primary school right up to the end of secondary school education at Form Five. It is not taught at the pre–university level. As such, students upon entry into public universities are required to undergo a course in the proficiency of the English Language.

Hence, in order to overcome this problem and to fill in the gap created, the Malaysian University English Test or MUET was introduced. The purpose is to help students attain that level of proficiency in order for them to pursue their tertiary education effectively. This Malaysian University English Test or MUET which is administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council, measures the proficiency level of pre–university students in the English Language. Since its introduction in 1999, it has become a requirement for students, who wish to enter public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia for first degree courses, to sit for this examination. The main emphasis is on the student's competence in communication on the use of the language at the tertiary level and also at the same time, developing critical thinking during the use of the various language skills employed.

1.2.1   Eligibility for MUET

The candidates who can sit for the MUET exam are those who have passed the following public exams:-

➢ Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM)
➢ Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)
➢ Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Vocational) (SPMV)
➢ Federation of Malaysia Certificate of Education

- ➢ Cambridge School Certificate
- ➢ A 10-year education that is equivalent to O–Levels

(Koo Soo Ling, 2008, MUET MODEL TESTS)

Enquiries can be made at the Malaysian Examinations Council for candidates who have sat for any other exam that is not listed above so as to get prior permission in order to sit for this examination.

1.2.2   The Frequency of the MUET examination

The MUET examination is held twice in a year. For the examination held in the middle of the year, the registration is held in mid–January. As for the examination held at the end of the year, the registration is done in May.

School candidates are registered through the schools while private candidates will have to register with the respective State Education Departments.

1.2.3   Description of Aggregated Scores for MUET

The Malaysian University English Test or MUET syllabus on the whole specifically deals with the four components of the language skills, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The tests are also specifically designed to gauge the proficiency level of the students concerned in each of the skills.

The assessment of the student's level of proficiency is based on an aggregated score range of zero to three hundred (0 – 300). This aggregated score is divided into six levels called bands – Band 1 being a very limited user to Band 6 being a highly proficient user.

The table below gives a detailed description of the aggregated scores.

Aggregated score	Ba-nd	User	Communicative ability	Comprehension	Task Performance
260 – 300	6	Highly Proficient	• Very fluent • Highly appropriate use of language • Hardly any grammatical error	Very good understanding of language and context	Very high ability to function in the language
220 – 259	5	Proficient	• Fluent • Appropriate use of language • Few grammatical errors	Good understanding of language and context	High ability to function in the language
180 – 219	4	Satisfactory	• Generally fluent • Generally appropriate use of language • Some grammatical errors	Satisfactory understanding of language and context	Satisfactory ability to function in the language
140 – 179	3	Modest	• Fairly fluent • Fairly appropriate use of language • Many grammatical errors	Fair understanding of language and context	Fair ability to function in the language
100 – 139	2	Limited	• Not fluent • Inappropriate use of language • Very frequent grammatical errors	Limited understanding of language and context	Limited ability to function in the language
Below 100	1	Very Limited	• Hardly able to use the language	Very limited understanding of language and context	Very limited ability to function in the language

Table 1.1 Description of Aggregated Scores

(Masy Tang, 2009, MUET Model Papers, New MUET format)

1.2.4   Latest MUET Test Specifications and Descriptions as of October 2008

The Malaysian University English Test or MUET examination has four language components, namely Paper 1 – Listening, Paper 2 – Speaking, Paper 3 – Reading or Reading Comprehension and Paper 4 – Writing.

Since 1999 till April 2008 the weightage for Paper 1 – Listening was 15%, Paper 2 – Speaking was 15%, Paper 3 – Reading was 45% and Paper 4 – Writing was 25%. But as of October 2008, the weightage for these papers have slightly changed. The weightage for Paper 1 – Listening remains at 15% with slight changes in the format. In Paper 2 – Speaking, the weightage also remains at 15% and there were no latest changes in the format. (Note:- There was a mild change in the very early stage).

In Paper 3 – Reading or Reading Comprehension, the weightage had changed from 45% to 40% with a few changes in the format.

In the case of Paper 4 – Writing, the weightage had also changed from 25% to 30% with changes in the format.

Hence, all this is shown clearly in the tables below.

Duration and Weightage

The duration and weighting of each of the four components is as follows:

Paper Code	Paper	Duration	Weighting
800/1	Listening	30 minutes	15%
800/2	Speaking	30 minutes	15%
800/3	Reading	90 minutes	40%
800/4	Writing	90 minutes	30%

Test scores are reported as follows:

Test Component	Maximum Score	Score Obtained
Listening	45	
Speaking	45	
Reading	120	
Writing	90	
Aggregated Score	300	
Band Achieved (1 – 6)		

Table 1.2 Latest Test Specifications (Koo Soo Ling, 2008, MUET MODEL TESTS)

Test Description

Paper 1: Listening

No.	Item	Description
1	Number of texts	5
2	Possible genres	Lecture, briefing, talk, discussion, interview, telephone conversation, announcement, advertisement, news, meeting, documentary
3	Number of questions	20
4	Possible question types	1. Information transfer 2. Short answer questions 3. 3 – option multiple choice questions 4. 4 – option multiple choice questions

Paper 2: Speaking

No.	Item	Description
1	Number of tasks	2
2	Topic	Contemporary issues
3	Task Format	1. Task A: Individual Presentation 2. Task B: Group Interaction

Paper 3: Reading

No.	Item	Description
1	Number of texts	6
2	Basic criteria for text selection	Length (200 – 700 words), level of complexity (content and language), text type
3	Possible genres	Articles from journals, newspapers and magazines, academic texts, electronic texts
4	Number of questions	45
5	Possible question types	1. 3 – option multiple choice questions 2. 4 – option multiple choice questions

Paper 4: Writing

No.	Item	Description
1	No. of questions	2
2	Possible genres	Report, article, letter, essay
3	Rhetorical styles	Analytical, descriptive, persuasive, argumentative
4	Task	1. Question 1: Interpretation of information based on specific stimuli provided (not less than 150 words) 2. Question 2: Extended writing based on a given topic (not less than 150

		words)

Table 1.3: Test description (Koo Soo Ling, 2008, MUET MODEL TESTS)

1.2.5 Comparison between the Old and New MUET Formats

Since the new format was put into effect as of October 2008, constant comparisons have been made between the old and new formats. The table below shows this:

Specification	Old Format	New Format
Paper 1: Listening (800/1)		
Duration	30 minutes	30 minutes
Weighting	15%	15%
Task/Test Format	Listening to 3 recorded texts twice and answering 15 four-option multiple choice question	Listening to 5 recorded texts twice and answering 20 questions (information transfer, short-answer questions, three-option multiple choice questions, four-option multiple choice questions) **Possible genres**: News, lecture, briefing, meeting, interview, discussion, instructions, documentary, advertisement, announcement, telephone conversation
Maximum score	45 marks	45 marks
Paper 2: Speaking (800/2)		
Duration	30 minutes	30 minutes
Weighting	15%	15%

Task/Test Format	Task A: Individual presentation Task B: Group presentation	Task A: Individual presentation Task B: Group presentation **Possible genres**: Contemporary issues
Maximum score	45 marks	45 marks
Paper 3: Reading (800/3)		
Duration	120 minutes	90 minutes
Weighting	45%	40%
Task/Test Format	Answering 50 questions based on 4 texts (cloze, information transfer & multiple-choice questions)	Answering 45 three-option and four-option multiple choice question based on 6 shorter texts (at least 1 text with graphics) **Possible genres**: Journals, magazines, newspapers academic and electronic sources
Maximum score	135 marks	120 marks
Paper 4: Writing (800/4)		
Duration	90 min	90 min
Weighting	25%	30%
Task/Test Format	Task 1: Summary of not more than 100 marks Task 2: Extended writing of not fewer than 250 words	Task 1: Interpretation of information based on specific stimuli provided (no less than 150 words) Task 2: Extended writing based on a given topic (no less than 350 words) **Possible genres:** Letter, report, essay, article
Maximum score	75 marks	90 marks
Aggregated score = 300 marks		

Table 1.4 Comparison between old and new formats (Masy Tang, 2009, MUET Model Papers)

1.3 Higher - Order Thinking Skills (or HOTS) and Language Cues in General

Higher-order thinking skills or HOTS is basically extracted from Bloom's Taxonomy. In this hierarchical arrangement of Bloom's Taxonomy which is widely accepted, there are six levels. The lower three levels, namely, Knowledge, Comprehension and Application are categorized as lower-order thinking skills, which is widely used and applied. The next three levels above this, namely, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation are categorized as higher-order thinking skills or HOTS.

These six levels in Bloom's Taxonomy are depicted in various diagrammatical forms by writers who have written on Bloom's Taxonomy. Diagrams on this can be seen in the form of triangles, rectangles, concentric circles, cylinders and so on depending on the writer. But whatever the diagram may be, the hierarchy of the taxonomy remains the same.

This can be best explained by looking at the diagram.

Bloom's Taxonomy (the six levels)

1. Knowledge
2. Comprehension
3. Application
4. Analysis
5. Synthesis
6. Evaluation

Higher - order thinking skills

Lower–order thinking skills

Evaluation

Synthesis

Analysis

Application

Comprehension
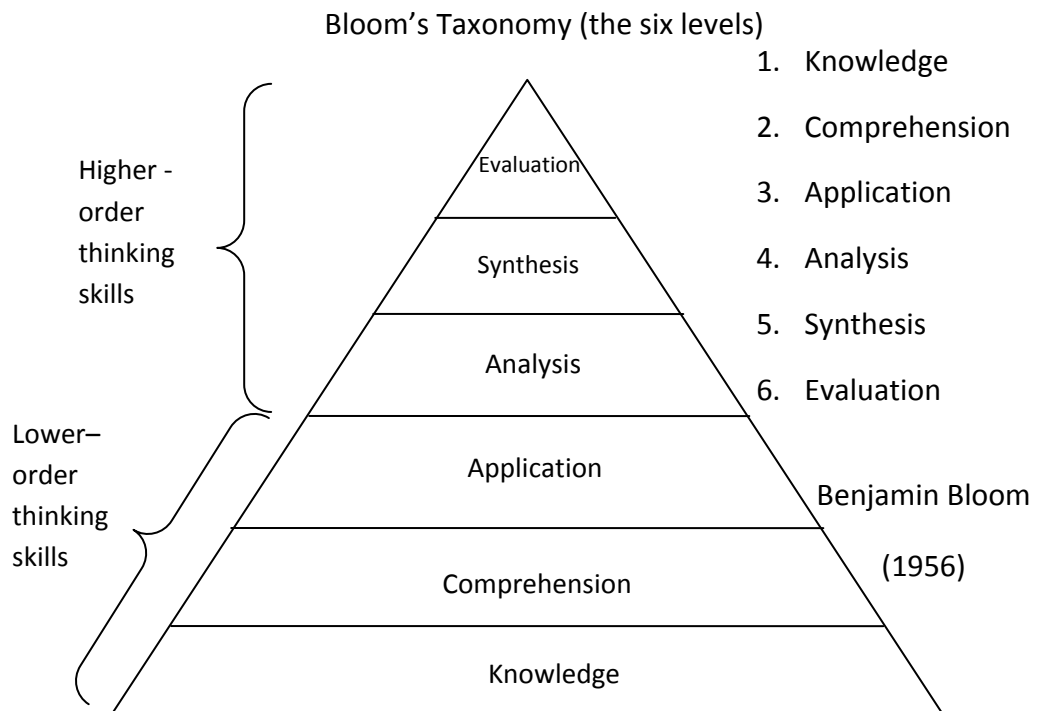
Knowledge

Benjamin Bloom

(1956)

Diagram 1.1 Bloom's Taxonomy (the six levels)

(David W. Dillard, Arcadia Valley, CTC, Higher-order Thinking Skills)

An educational consultant from Nashville, North Carolina, John Grischow said that "students who develop higher-order thinking skills become life-long learners – capable of analysing new situation, relating new information to what they already know, and think critically and creatively to solve problems, improve processes and understand their world."

(http://www.curriculumassociates.com/professional-development/topics/Higher-Order-Thinking/index.htm).

In the mid-nineties, a former student of Bloom by the name of Lorin Anderson made some changes in the cognitive domain of the learning taxonomy. The two most significant ones are (1) changing the names in the six levels from noun to verb forms (2) mild changes in the six levels, especially in the higher-order level.

It was generally felt that this new taxonomy reflected a more active form of thinking. Therefore the new changes looked as in the diagram and were felt to be more accurate.
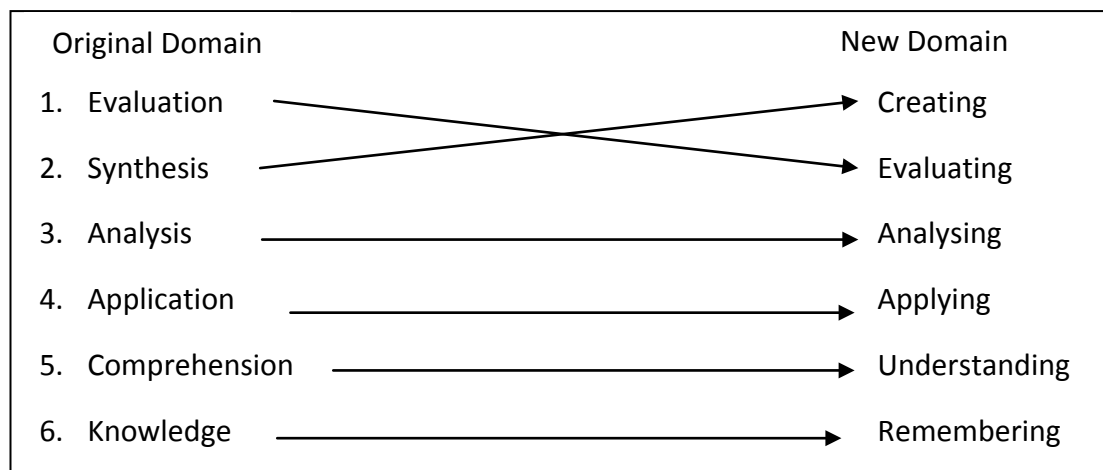

Diagram 1.2 – Changes in the cognitive domains (http://www.nwlink.com)

In 2002, an adaptation of Bloom's work was provided by Clark in order to facilitate an active form of learning. This can be seen in the diagram by Clark. The innermost ring

is the original Bloom's taxonomy levels. The next outer middle ring shows synonyms for that taxonomic level for the different academic processes while the outermost ring shows the connection to the products as a result of these processes. For instance, if one wanted to improve on the creative skills, the students can be asked to produce their own cartoons and so on.
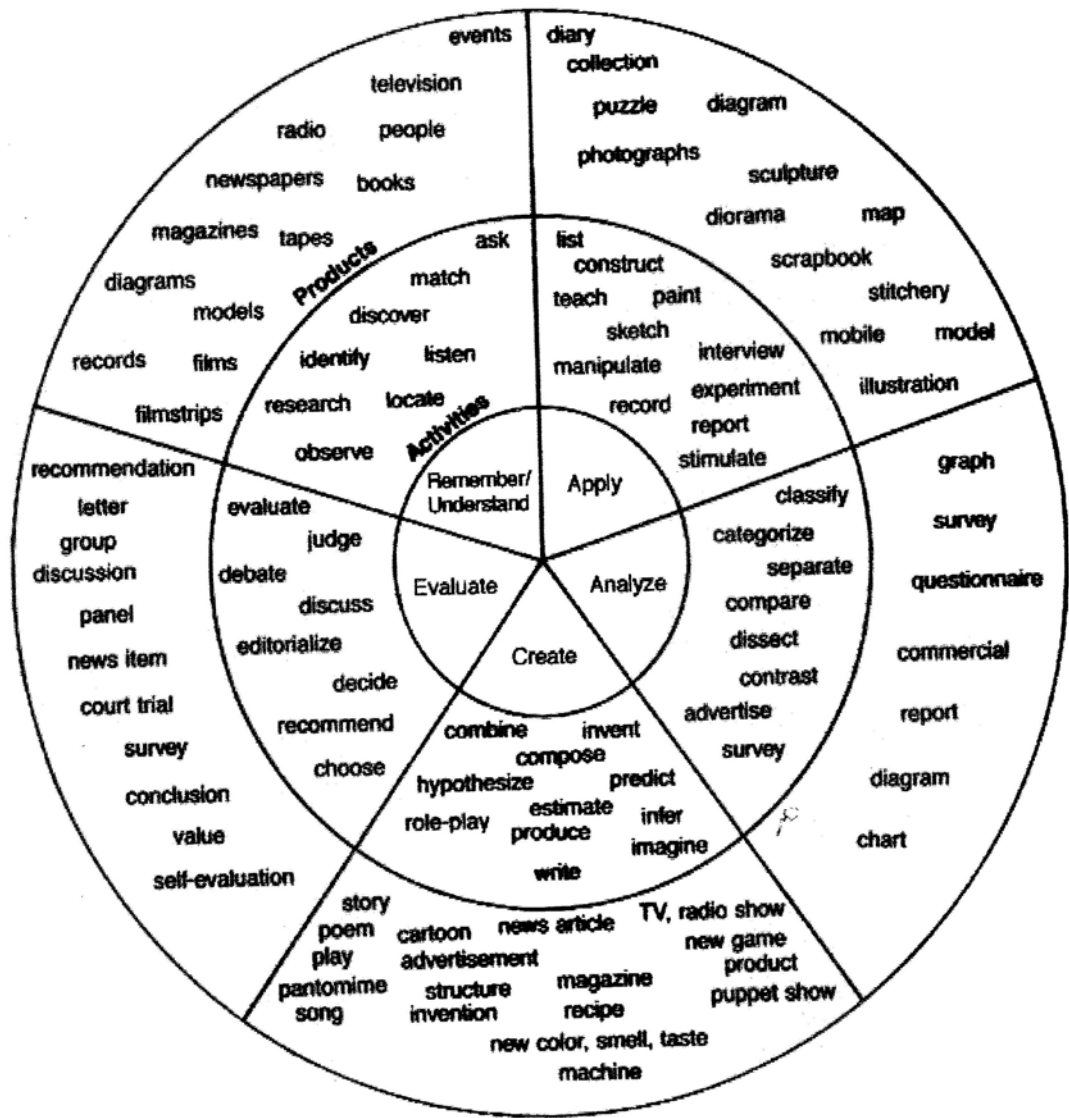

Diagram 1.3 Clark's adaptation of Bloom's Taxonomy - Cognitive Taxonomy Circle

Clark, B. (2002), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merril Prentice Hall, Growing up gifted: Developing the potential of children at home and at school,.

http://www.apa.org/ed/new_bloom's.html

Thus it can be said that like other skills, higher-order thinking skills or HOTS can be learned and with practice, can be improved upon. Unity, integrity and coherence are displayed in these higher - order thinking skills.

(http://www.apa.org/ed/new_bloom's.html)

Language cues also play an important part in developing higher–order thinking skills. In meaningful contexts, such as in the four language components of MUET, development of vocabulary is very important. This vocabulary development becomes more effective when students learn to match or identify the vocabulary that they have learnt. By doing it in this way, they will also learn to have their own understanding reinforced.

Development of vocabulary leads to development of language cues which is essential for use in the higher–order thinking skills which in turn can be used in the four language components of MUET, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Therefore, it can be seen that the use of language cues has a domino–like effect in higher–order thinking skills and in the four language components of MUET.

It is important for students to have a command of language cues which will serve as important cues to quick thinking and to be able to combine it with the higher–order thinking skills. This combination of these two will enable the students to handle the tasks required in the four language components of MUET.

Language cues can be seen in the form of language cueing systems. By using the language cues in the language cueing systems, students are expected to develop abilities to (1) use combined knowledge of context, syntax clues, sight words, word structures, and graphophonics to draw meaning from print, (2) employ a variety of problem solving strategies when confronted with an unfamiliar word.

(http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/ela/e_literacy/intergrating.html)

These language cueing systems are sets of language cues which have been built into the structures and patterns of the English Language. "They are called systems because the English Language is systematic in the ways that words are ordered to create meaning, letters and sounds are related, punctuation is used, and in the ways that the English Language is used to communicate."

(http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/ela/e_literacy/intergrating.html)

The writer of this article in the above website also said that students can be taught to recognize and use these relatively predictable language patterns within text and by this they can become independent readers and writers. Furthermore, students can also be taught other problem–solving strategies such as the use of picture clues (in the case of the Malaysian University English Test, they are in the form of non–linear texts). Hence, it can be said that the combination of these cueing systems and the problem–solving strategies help the students to "figure things out for themselves".

(http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/ela/e_literacy/intergrating.html)

Therefore, it can be said that learning can be increased by the use of language cues in the form of cueing systems and in the form of higher–order thinking skills in the teaching of the Malaysian University English Test.

1.4 Statement of the problem

As stated earlier, the Malaysian University English Test or MUET is basically a proficiency test. Although there are many books on MUET available on the market, not many students are able to score a high band. It has been an uphill task on the part of our

Malaysian Ministry of Education and our Malaysian Examinations Council to build up the proficiency level of our students. Despite all the facilities provided, Malaysian children display more rote-learning skills. (Mariani Md-Nor, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, UK, INVESTIGATION OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF RATIO AND PROPORTION IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS) - http://www.bsrlm.org.uk/IPs/ip17-3/BSRLM-IP-17-3-6.pdf .

The Malaysian University English Test or MUET is a fairly recent endeavour on the part of our Malaysian Ministry of Education as well as the Malaysian Examinations Council to help our Malaysian students to attain a fairly competent level of the English Language in order to enter any one of our local universities so that they can perform well "in their academic pursuit at tertiary level" (Malaysian University English Test syllabus). Another important feature is "preparing students to meet various academic challenges through the development of critical thinking and the competent use of the language skills" (Malaysian University English Test Syllabus).

1.5 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to find out whether the keywords or rather the language cues, reflecting higher-order thinking skills, according to Bloom's taxonomy, can be found in the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test. The purpose is to enable the students to think critically, analyse and problem-solve, which is reflective of higher-order thinking skills. It is hoped by doing this, the proficiency level will improve simultaneously.

1.6 Research Questions

In view of what has been mentioned earlier, the researcher seeks to answer the following questions:-

1. What are the language cues reflecting higher-order thinking skills in Bloom's taxonomy found in the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test?

2. What are the language cues of higher-order thinking skills in Bloom's Taxonomy found in the Malaysian University English Test Syllabus and text books?

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because the researcher is looking at the possibility of killing two birds with one stone. This means that while trying to enhance the proficiency level of the students in the English Language, the researcher is also looking into the possibility of highlighting the language cues found in the four components of Malaysian University English Test or MUET in order to develop critically thinking, analysing and problem-solving minds.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations in the sense, that there is no one specific standardized textbook for MUET. Since its introduction in 1999, schools and institutions have relied on samples issued along with the syllabus. Since then, several books on MUET have

been on sale in the market. This has taken a turn in October 2008 when there was a change in the format. Only a few books are available on the market now on the new format.

Schools and institutions have no standardized textbook and as such the researcher has to rely on the language cues available in the existing books on the market.

Another limitation is that the researcher had to conduct this research based on the current MUET syllabus, and the current MUET textbooks available on the market. As such, what is stated in this study is theoretically based. Fieldwork could not be carried out due to unforeseen circumstances. However, the researcher feels that based on the study conducted, if implemented, the success rate will be very high. Besides, students stand to gain if this system is implemented.

1.9 Summary

In this chapter an overview has been given on the language cues in MUET while encouraging the application of higher-order thinking skills. The researcher goes on to elaborate a little on MUET and higher-order thinking skills paving the way for the statement of the problem, purpose statement and research questions, not to forget the significance and limitations of this study.