

Chapter 5 - Discussion on the Findings and Conclusion

5.1 Overview

In this chapter, there will be a discussion and conclusion on all the previous chapters, predominantly on Chapter 4. These findings and conclusion are important because based on this, steps can be taken for improvement so that students can perform better.

5.2 Discussion and Findings

It has been a wise move on the part of our Malaysian Ministry of Education to have introduced the Malaysian University English Test or MUET in 1999 through the Malaysian Examinations Council. The Director of the Higher Ministry of Education, Prof. Dato' Dr. Hj. Ahmad Zainuddin, said that students need to equip themselves with thinking skills and language skills (Koo Soo Ling, 2009, Effective Text for MUET)

Basically, the purpose of having this examination is to produce a set of students with a certain level of competence in communication in the English Language. This competence is essential for many purposes.

One of the reasons is that the national language of our country Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia. Hence although it is essential and compulsory for the students to have a good command of the National Language, it is equally important for them to have a good command of the English Language as well, in order to fit into this Informational and Technological era. Although a lot of effort has been put in to translate many books in the National Language, a still greater portion remains in the English Language. This

is so in many fields of study. Therefore students need a good command of the English Language in their pursuit of knowledge at the tertiary level.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education is keen to make our country Malaysia, the hub of learning for this region. Therefore English becomes an international tool not only in communication but in the pursuit of knowledge as well. As the saying goes “charity begins at home”, it therefore becomes vital that we begin by preparing our own students to set the trend by achieving a certain level of competence in the English Language especially those at the doorstep of pursuing tertiary education. This is where the sitting for the Malaysian University English Test or MUET comes in. This is proof that a certain level of competence has been achieved.

On examining the test specifications for the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test or MUET and the six levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, it was found that what was found in Bloom’s Taxonomy was exactly what is to required in MUET. In Bloom’s Taxonomy, the six levels are Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. Of these, Knowledge, Comprehension and Application are categorized as lower-order thinking skills while Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation are categorized as higher-order thinking skills. In MUET, all six levels are utilized along with their subdivisions which clearly specify the requirements.

In the later years, there have been many revisions on Bloom’s Taxonomy, some even by his own students like Lorin Anderson and others to keep in pace with the changing times. In fact Anderson inverted the fifth and sixth levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, that is, Synthesis and Evaluation to Evaluation and then Synthesis . The original levels were nouns such as Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis,

Synthesis and Evaluation. These have been changed from noun forms to verb forms such as Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating and Creating. This is supposed to reflect a more active form of thinking. There are three types of learning domains in Bloom's Taxonomy of learning, namely, the cognitive domain, the affective domain and the psychomotor domain. For this study, only the cognitive domain has been looked into. Comparisons have been made between the cognitive domain and the MUET syllabus. This study showed a lot of similarities and connections between the cognitive domain and what is required in the MUET syllabus. Incidentally the other two learning domains, the affective domain and the psychomotor domain are not part of the study.

This study made the connection between the syllabus of the Malaysian University English Test and the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy. The cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy is not something new, in the sense, it has always been there. Therefore when the syllabus of the Malaysian University English Test was found to be based on Bloom's Taxonomy it was something not entirely different either. It was just carried out in a more systematic and orderly manner. What the study has done is to show the connection between the two and it is hoped that the use of language cues will be helpful to the students in order to score a better band in their results. It is also hoped that the success rate will be better and the students will be able to challenge the various academic pursuits critically and competently as according to the MUET syllabus. Thus far, various aspects of MUET have been highlighted

The use of language cues will help the students to recognize the clues faster and respond at a faster pace. Along with that, the students can be taught to approach all this along the lines of higher-order thinking skills. The Malaysian University English Test can be considered in a way with all the four testing language components of Listening,

Speaking, Reading and Writing. So, the use of language cues along the lines of higher-order thinking skills will help the students to become more proficient and confident.

Of the six levels in Bloom's Taxonomy, namely, Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation, the first three, that is, Knowledge, Comprehension and Application are said to be lower-order thinking skills. The other three, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation are considered as higher-order thinking skills or HOTS. It must be borne in mind that every level is important. More often than not, it is the lower-order thinking skills that are in use because of convenience, not the higher-order thinking skills. It has been the purpose of this study to highlight the importance and the necessity to make use of the higher-order thinking skills or HOTS.

The study has also showed that a lot of research has been done on thinking skills over the past years. One thing is clear in that, although a lot of research and study has been done and a lot of books have been published, yet there is not one standardized textbook on how to enforce it nor has there been a follow up on it. Yet another factor is how to train teachers for this particular skill. Questions arise as to what to teach at each level and whether the teachers are equipped to be able to teach in this area. Furthermore, there are also no clear cut methods of training as it varies from one institution to institution and from person to person. There are no set answers and therefore the question arises as to how enforce it at the layman's level.

Continuous efforts are being made to incorporate thinking skills in the teaching curriculum as currently, there is a trend towards a more critical thinking society. As such the researcher felt that higher-order thinking skills along with language cues should be incorporated in the Malaysian University English Test syllabus as at this stage students need to make use of these finer skills in their tertiary education. But as luck

would have it, the higher-order thinking skills of Bloom's Taxonomy are already in the syllabus of the Malaysian University English Test. Hence, this paves the way to make maximum use of these skills with the help of language cues. Dr. Devikamani Menon of the University of Malaya, in her article 'Using Three Interactive Teaching-Learning Techniques' suggested, of using techniques of Group Discussion and Group Essay and Interactive Journal Writing. These would be of help in the teaching of the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test.

Burdhardt et al (2003.online) outlined the major qualities displayed by students who are higher-order thinkers. These include the ability to (1) identify the core elements in a problem and the interaction between these elements. (2) assign values to the core elements of a problem and use those values to grade the elements in logical ways. (3) build relationships between the core elements of a problem that provide insight into the problem. (4) create and apply criteria to measure the strengths, weaknesses and value of information, data and solution. (5) create new solutions by combining elements of existing information and use electronic tools to aid their data analysis. (<http://adt.curtin.edu.au/theses/available/adt-wcu20070525>).

The teaching of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing which are the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test and the teaching of higher-order thinking skills are closely related.

There is data available on thinking skills and higher-order skills, but there is no set or rather a standardised textbook to teach these skills at each level. Teachers are required to teach these skills whenever possible. So the result is that some teachers will teach and some will not.

To teach higher-order thinking skills, teachers must have sufficient knowledge and the right attitude. Apart from this, teachers will have to be trained. Then the question arises as to the type of pedagogical skills to use and how much of the subject matter to be taught and at what level. “As Cohen (1988a) points out ‘Teachers who take this path must work harder, concentrate more and embrace larger pedagogical responsibilities than if they only assigned text chapters and seatwork (pg. 255)’ ” (Dr. Nagappan R., 2001, *Language Teaching and the Enhancement of Higher-Order Thinking Skills*).

Another finding is that given the various methods that can be used, teachers generally find it easier teaching the English Language alone rather than having to incorporate the teaching of higher-order thinking skills as well. Probably, if HOTS is part and parcel of the teacher-training programme, it does not give room for excuses.

Dr. Nagappan R. (2001) (*Language Teaching and Enhancement of Higher-Order Thinking Skills*) “in a study on the teaching of higher-order thinking skills in language classrooms (Nagappan, 1998a) found that although 59 per cent of the teachers had received some form of training to teach higher-order thinking skills and the rest 41 per cent of the teachers did not receive any training to teach higher-order thinking skills, this did not seem to have significantly influenced their perceptions of their knowledge, pedagogical skills and attitude.”

According to Dr. Nagappan R. also, programs and approaches that have been developed to teach thinking in the classrooms reflect the many-faceted nature of thinking and differ not only in methodology but in goals. (*Language Teaching and Enhancement of Higher-Order Thinking Skills*, 2001).

The researcher feels that apart from the methodologies that can be used, teachers need to have a solid understanding of the English Language so that they can use relevant language cues along with the higher-order thinking skills in the methodologies used. It is important to use the relevant cues so that the students can feel confident and feel that they can handle things on their own. Dr. Nagappan R. also says “teachers need to possess the right attitude and beliefs necessary to teach higher-order thinking skills and the English Language.” (Language Teaching and the Higher-Order Thinking Skills, 2001).

In Chapter 4, each component was discussed at length, inclusive of the higher-order thinking skills and the need to use language cues. Apart from teaching the language skills for that component, teachers will have to find time to incorporate the teaching of higher-order thinking skills and the use of language cues in each of these components. Then the question arises, that, within that class-time for that lesson, how much time is going to be given for the teaching of language skills, how much time for the higher-order thinking skills and how much time to teach the use of language cues.

The pedagogical skills of the teachers have to be revamped to accommodate the teaching of higher-order thinking skills along with language cues. The teachers will also have to be knowledgeable with the content of the English Language, and especially so of higher-order thinking skills and language cues. The attitude of the teacher also plays a part as the teacher has to put up a very positive front and show the students that it can be done.

The revised version of the new MUET syllabus makes the students to think critically, analyse situations, summarise and evaluate and also to infer. All these are

features of higher-order thinking skills. They also need language cues to help them achieve this level.

One of the problems that students may encounter is that, in the Listening component, some of the students will not be able to jot down notes easily. Probably they may not be fluent in the language, or the length of the texts may be too long for them to maintain concentration, or they may be used to listening to mostly colloquial English. This is where if they are familiar with language cues, it may help them.

Similarly, in the Speaking component, students may encounter problems in the form of giving oral reports or descriptions. Some of them may also face the difficulty of asking or even answering questions, much less presenting or countering an argument. Students generally fear expressing themselves or taking part in class-room discussions for fear of making mistakes in their speech. Another aspect is that, students sometimes face difficulty in speaking because they do not know the subject matter well. The researcher is of the opinion that since some students are fluent in the English Language and some are not so fluent, it would be better to expose all to the use of language cues so that the less fluent ones will gain some amount of confidence and be able to use it to some extent.

The problems faced in the Reading component of the Malaysian University English Test, is that, students will have to be fluent enough to read quickly to understand all the information. This is what is called skim and scan. Apart from this, students will have to learn to pick out the main points from the texts. Furthermore, they will have to be able to read critically. Now, this can be made complicated if the subject matter of the texts is difficult to absorb. This is where the researcher feels that

familiarity with language cues will bring confidence to the students and will not frighten them. If students can master the familiar language cues, it will help them.

In the Writing component of the Malaysian University English Test, the problem facing students is the fear of being able to write grammatically correct sentences. Generally, students want to be able to use appropriate grammatical sentence structures and appropriate vocabulary. Besides, they want to be able to write on any given subject matter and to be able to express themselves clearly. Another problem which may face students, is that, they may face the problem of putting in the main points and sub-points in writing. Besides they may face problems in punctuation, spelling, and developing their ideas in paragraph writing. Hence, with the help of language cues, students will be able to handle this component with a certain amount of confidence.

Thus, it can be seen that language cues do help the students to some extent, especially the weaker ones. If language cues along with higher-order thinking skills can be taught to the students in a systemic manner, students will definitely be able to perform better.

5.3 Looking at the Study in the Malaysian Context

Huckleberry, Michael J. (2004) in his dissertation, *Understanding in the ESL Classroom: A Case Study*, said “The Ministry of Education in Malaysia desires to send people out into the work force who can think laterally and relate to a variety of different people.” According to Huckleberry’s research also, (1) Ting Mee Kian (1999) found that the Malaysian students were weak in questioning skills but (2) Azmi (2003) showed that Malaysians are willing to try new things in order to improve their education and standard of English.

Ponampalam, Saraswathy (2003) in her dissertation, *The English Language Needs of Medical Students in Institutions of Higher Learning*, stressed the importance of listening, speaking, reading and writing (as found in MUET) for academic work.

Keith W. Wright in his article, 'Methods of Teaching English' (Star Education, 14 Feb 2010) stated that over the last six to seven decades, there have been a wide range of approaches to teaching English to speakers of other languages. Wright has also suggested a range of English Training methodologies, some of which can be found in text books while the other are probably the latest innovative methods. In his article, he mentioned: The Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), The Cognitive Code Approach, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Community Language Teaching, The Direct Approach, The Grammar Translation Method, The Lexical Approach, The Notional-Functional Approach, The Phonic Approach, The Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP), Method, The Silent Way, The Situational Approach, The Suggestopaedia Method, The Whole Word – Look and Say Approach and the 4S Approach to Literacy & Language (4S). Looking at the methodologies available, writer Kevin Wright goes on to say that teachers and tutors only need to use methods that will help to benefit the students most. (Star Education, 14 Feb 2010).

Thus, it can be seen that there is no one method to teach a language. It all depends on what method the teacher wishes to use seeing the background, environment and attitude of the students. Sometimes, teachers as well as students need motivation to accomplish the set tasks. Besides no one method is applicable to all sets of students. The tasks may be the same but different methods may have to be used to get it across to the students. Hence the same can be said of the tasks to be fulfilled in the Malaysian University English Test, the higher-order thinking skills and not forgetting language cues.

In the Listening component of MUET, for instance, the teachers will have to teach the students how to recall information, recognize main ideas, and supporting details. The teachers will also have to teach how to get meanings of words, phrases and sentences from context and how to paraphrase. Based on what has been taught them, students should be able to predict outcomes, take notes, differentiate the relevant from the irrelevant, fact from opinion and how to draw inferences and recognize roles and relationships. Above all, students are taught to listen critically. With so many skills involved under one component, teachers will have to decide which method is appropriate for each skill.

In the MUET Speaking component, teachers will have to teach students accuracy and fluency. They will have to use methods to show how to use correct language grammatically and how to use correct pronunciation, stress and intonation so that students will be able to speak with confidence. Apart from this, students will have to learn the right language for the intended purpose and to be able to use a variety of vocabulary, expressions and sentence structures. In all this, teachers will have to know which of the teaching methods to apply. Students, on the other hand, will have to know how to develop and organize ideas, use appropriate markers and linking words and also know the art of coherence and cohesion. Hence, no one method only can be used but a variety has to be used in order to get the desired result.

A different set of methods will have to be in use for the Reading component of MUET. Teachers will have to teach students how to skim and scan, how to extract specific information, identify main ideas and supporting details, derive meaning of words from context, understand linear and non-linear texts and also how to recognize relationships. By using the methods also, students should be able to predict outcomes, analyse, draw inferences, interpret non-linear texts, and follow the development of a

point and to be able to relate ideas and concepts. In all this, the teachers should be able to use the appropriate teaching methods. All this requires practice. Therefore in order to acquire a near perfect skill, a lot of practice is required in order to master language cues and HOTS. It requires determination.

Teachers will have to use the same teaching methods but approach them differently for teaching the Writing component of MUET. Here, they should be able to guide the students on accuracy, correct language usage and sentence structures. They will also have to teach how to use appropriate language and use a variety of vocabulary, expressions and sentence structures. In the Writing component, coherence and cohesion is very important in the sense of knowing how to develop and organize ideas, use suitable markers and linking words and to be able to fulfil the given task. On the use of language functions, teachers will have to teach them how to define, describe and explain, compare and contrast, give opinions, express agreement and disagreement and to be able to make suggestions and recommendations. A person who doesn't know how to begin can start by using the language cues.

So it can be seen that although there are a variety of teaching methods available, teachers will have to decide which teaching method would be suitable for the task at hand. Then the teachers will have to teach and prepare the students accordingly.

The three most popular language cueing systems used are the semantic language cueing system, the syntactic language cueing system and the graphophonic language cueing system. A good knowledge of these systems will help in the use of language cues.

The semantic cueing system deals with meanings, such as making sense of whatever the text may be and trying to relay some meaningful connections. These are

also the context clues which are found in the texts and which are also found in the background knowledge. These, in fact, come from the experiences of the students. In the semantic cueing system also, if need be, teachers will have to teach language cues from story line prompts, pictures, prior knowledge and so on. Teachers will also have to pick out and teach language cues from various text forms.

The syntactic system deals more with structures. It is more like whether the word sounds right, trying to make sense of the actual words found in the sentences. The structural language cues that emerge from all this is actually from the students' own knowledge of the correct oral language structures. From the way the language is formatted into phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, emerges the language cues that students will want to use.

In the graphophonic language cueing system, it is more visual, like does it look right. Here, the visual language cues come from students themselves developing knowledge of letter/sound relationships. The students will have to figure whether the sounds and the words being read match.

Therefore, it can be seen that all three systems in one or the other support one another. Language cues then teaches one to use the sensory organs. This implies that HOTS is something anyone can pick up. It can also relate to the teachers who have had no training to train themselves as well as the students. There are other factors involved. An individual cannot blame someone for not teaching him/her how to use as there are guidelines. A fine example is language cues. Brandi R. P .Thacker, *What's Your Cue? Incorporating the Semantic and Graphophonic Cueing Systems into Students' Reading*, says "all systems must be activated in order for the reader to maintain ongoing comprehension of the text."

5.4 Conclusion

This is an exploratory study looking at the use of language cues for higher-order thinking skills in the Malaysian University English Test or MUET syllabus. The purpose of this study was to find out whether 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 significance was that, that while trying to enhance the proficiency level of the students in the English Language, the researcher was also looking into the possibility of highlighting the use of language cues in higher-order thinking skills in the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test or MUET. Although previous literature had revealed studies on thinking skills, higher-order thinking skills in Malaysia, the researcher was keen to show how language cues can be used for higher-thinking skills in the four language components of the Malaysian University English Test.

The findings in this study were corroborated with the findings done in the previous research and literature in the sense that, what was explored in previous studies were brought together along with the findings in this study bringing to light the other features which the researcher felt was necessary. Once again, there was no fieldwork involved in this study due to time constraint, but the researcher was glad to be able to highlight the methods for collecting and analyzing the data in a theoretical manner. This proved to be tremendously fruitful to the researcher because it revealed new insights into the study, thereby making it possible that, should a fieldwork be carried out based on this study, it will prove to be successful and valuable.

The researcher also feels that this study has enabled or rather paved the way for further research to be carried out. The researcher sincerely hopes that this study will

provide valuable insights to anyone reading it. The researcher also sincerely feels that this study will help all students doing the Malaysian University English Test to achieve a better target if the suggestions and recommendations can be implemented in a guided, standardized textbook.