

## Students' Perception of the Teaching of Historical Thinking Skills

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### ABSTRACT

History is a compulsory subject for all Malaysian secondary school students. History teaching and learning processes focus on historical thinking skills such as chronology, exploring evidence, making interpretations, imagination, and rationalizing. Competency in historical thinking skills enables students to think critically and creatively, to understand historical criteria, to perceive historical events emphatically, to explore complex and abstract ideas, and to appreciate ways historians construct past events using evidence to establish historical significance. A study on students' perceptions of the teaching of historical thinking skills in the subject was conducted in two secondary schools in Miri, Sarawak. The participants were 80 Form Four Science and Arts stream students. The findings showed students' perception of the teaching of historical thinking skills range from moderate to moderately high level. The result also showed no significant difference in perception between male and female students on all four historical thinking skills (chronology, exploring evidence, interpretation, and imagination). However, on the skill of rationalizing, male students showed a more positive perception (mean=3.85) compared to female students (mean=3.63). In addition, the t-test showed no significant difference in perception between Science and Arts stream students on four aspects of historical thinking skills (chronology, interpretations, imagination, and rationalizing). On the skill of exploring evidence, Arts students showed a more positive perception (mean=4.16) compared to Science students (mean=3.64). The implication of this study is that history teachers need to equip themselves with historical thinking skills so that the process of teaching and learning can be more effective which in turn could help enhance students' acquisition of historical thinking skills.

**Keywords:** History education, history curriculum, historical thinking skills, secondary school, Malaysia

### INTRODUCTION

Many decades ago, Dewey (1916) in his book *Democracy and Education* observed that, "All which the school can or need do for pupils, as far as their minds are concerned is to develop their ability to think" (cited in Schleifer, 1997, p. 78). Many educators support Dewey's rallying cry that education should be about developing children's thinking, not by telling them what to think, rather by helping them to find their own paths to meaning. If thinking is about how

children make sense of things, then developing their thinking skills will help them gain more out of learning and out of life. Teaching children to be good thinkers is both a rational and a moral effort and can be seen as the fulfilment of the potential of individuals through particular processes of education. These processes require more than mere isolated sets of thinking skills. They are inevitably also a matter of developing attitudes and dispositions.

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In studying history, the main objective is the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. It is with understanding that provides the frame of reference within which the items of information or historical facts find their place and meaning. History differs from most other subject matter in that its central concern is with the action of people and the significance and consequences of those actions. Historical events cannot be understood without reference to the motives and beliefs of the participants, although there can never be absolute certainty why they acted as they did. Despite the concern for evidence and rigour, historians have to make selections from the mass of evidence available and offer an interpretation of why and how events occurred as they did. This is because the wider the base of information, the greater the potential for developing understanding through the perceptions of significant connections and relationships (Fisher, 2008).

#### **HISTORY IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

History has been an integral component of the school curriculum. School history in particular, frequently is seen as a vehicle in which students supposedly learn the civic lessons that will influence them to become dependable and useful citizens. Thus history education plays its role to pass on desirable social attitudes, values, and behaviours (Cuban, 2001). In the Malaysian context, history has been recognized as an important subject in the effort to produce loyal and patriotic Malaysian citizens. To help nurture the spirit of citizenship, history learning is made compulsory to all students at both lower and upper secondary levels. Recently, there has been talk that history learning should begin at Year 1 in the primary school. The new status given to history is a significant change from the former curriculum whereby history was an optional subject at upper secondary level. Students could opt not to learn history while those in the science stream had been discouraged from learning history as a school subject (Abdul Rahim, 1999; Abdul Ghani 2008).

Despite the importance of history, its intended purpose and its alleged civic significance in school curriculum arguments remain about the quality of history education. As early as the nineteenth century, psychologist G. Stanley Hall (cited in Wineburg, 2004) claimed that history was the most poorly taught in school, and current researchers have claimed that its popularity has not grown. Surveys reveal that adults look back on history courses as “boring” and students’ perceptions remain that history is boring and is poorly taught (Seixas, 2004; Wineburg, 2004). Unsurprisingly, a number of parties have levelled criticisms concerning the teaching and learning of history and poor achievement in the subject, and expressed dissatisfaction with the way teachers are teaching the subject. Not only students have become victims, but history as a subject continued to be perceived as “boring” and “side-lined” due to ineffective teaching strategies (Abdul Rahim, 1999; Aini Hassan, 1999).

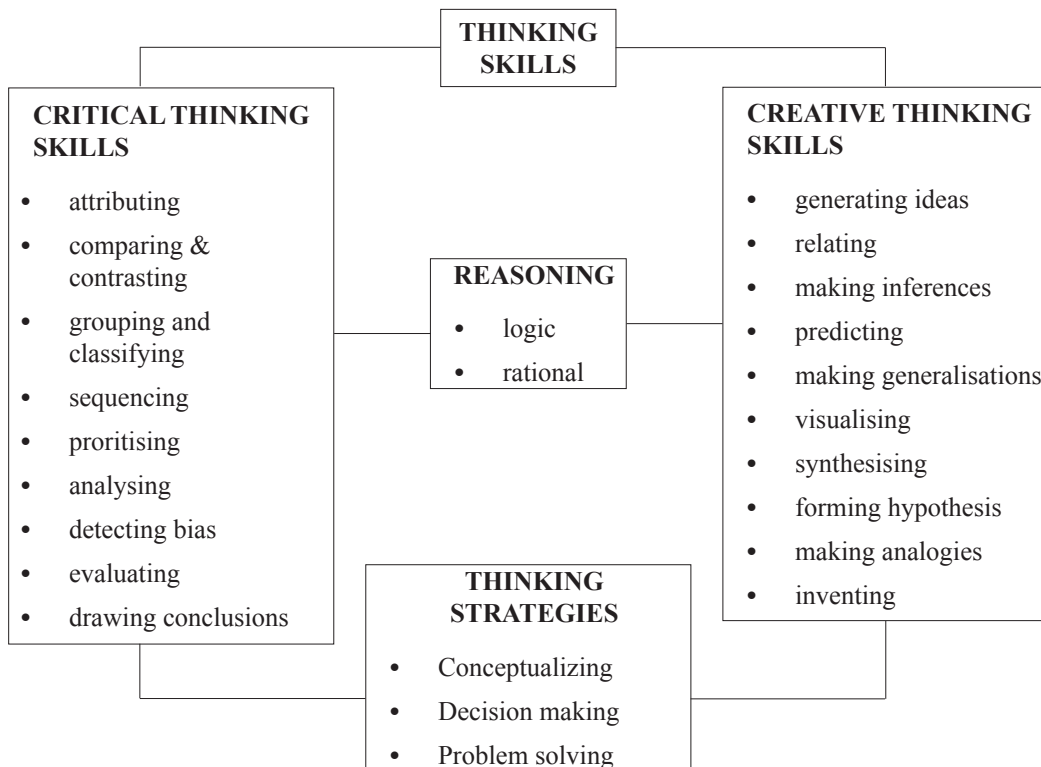
#### **TEACHING HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS**

Historical thinking skill (HTS) is generally defined as a process of using historical information, including deciphering context, perspective, point of view, and perceived facts to understand the past. Thinking in history, or the use of phrases such “thinking history” also may refer to a process of using critical thinking skills or higher level of thinking skills in the study of history. Other researchers in the field have defined the term “historical thinking” as simply “thinking like a historian”. This definition implies that a person’s effort and ability to place historical information or a historical document, including interpretations, meanings, and context, into the social setting in which it was created. Profesional historians use the process of defining value, objectivity, bias, sources, and content when interpreting and evaluating historical information or primary source documents. Helping secondary students to accomplish this task in history education is one of the challenges faced by many history teachers (Cuban, 2001; Seixas, 2004; Wineburg, 2004).

HTS is important to history education for several reasons. History provides opportunities to teach process skills, such as critical thinking, data analysis, making or identifying generalization, discovering biases, and recognizing perspectives. Recent studies have included the concept of historical empathy, or understanding the deeper context of historical events. Developing these skills through history learning would help students to develop process skills that enable them to engage in higher order thinking skills. The emphasis on historical thinking is seen as the key to helping students better understand the historical content by understanding the historical context. Providing opportunities for students to develop these higher level thinking skills prepares them to exercise a greater understanding of the past, but also increase awareness of their own perceptions and cultures and a greater understanding of others (Wineburg, 2004; Yeager and Foster, 2001).

The Malaysian Secondary School Integrated Curriculum, better known as KBSM, emphasizes teaching and learning processes that focus on the development of critical and creative thinking skills (CCTS) across all subjects. The thinking skills (TS) that students need to master are categorized into two components: critical thinking skill and creative thinking skills (KPM, 2004). Critical thinking is defined as the ability to evaluate, to judge, and to draw conclusion of an idea or concept. Creative thinking is the ability to generate and create original ideas. The CCTS are arranged in hierarchical order from basic skills to more complex skills. The CCTS model adopted by the Ministry of Education (KPM), as shown in *Fig. 1*, serves as a guide for teachers in developing CCTS in the process of teaching and learning.

In the KBSM history curriculum, CCTS is realized through the concept of Historical Thinking Skills (HTS) which is defined as a



*Fig. 1: The CCTS Model (KPM, 2004, p.9)*

cognitive process that enables students to explore complex and abstract ideas in learning history. The HTS that have been identified are as follows:

- i. Chronology: this skill comes under the critical thinking skill of sequencing. Chronological Skills contain two important elements: timelines and time convention. Timelines contain a series of events which happened according to chronology whereas time convention involves dates and events.
- ii. Exploring Evidence: this is the critical thinking skill which emphasizes the skill of identifying primary and secondary sources and then comparing them.
- iii. Interpretation: is the skill of analysing a historical event by analysing and explaining it through teaching and learning activities. Competence in this skill enables students to become aware of the fact that historians and researchers of history do analysis and that they will differentiate between facts in using the perspectives of historians.
- iv. Imagination: is linked to perceptions of the mind or on thoughts or visualising an idea, concept, situation or event. Through imagination students develop empathy in the situations of an event.
- v. Rationalizing: is the highest skill as it requires the skill of evaluating an event. Rationalizing requires students to go through the cognitive process of thinking and making sound evaluations as they resolve the issues involved in historical events.

In the History Learning and Teaching Module (KPM, 2000), the objectives of applying HTS are to enable students to: i) think critically and creatively; ii) understand the features of history; iii) develop empathy for historical events; iv) explore complex and abstract ideas with the teacher's guidance; and v) understand how historians re-construct past events using evidence to determine the significance of certain events. These objectives would be achieved through organized teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Consequently, teachers need to rectify their teaching styles and learning activities and adapt their instructional methods to the development of HTS using investigative methods such as questioning, simulation, evaluating, assessing and arguing. Students participate actively in the learning process through series of activities including role-plays, historical simulations, and classroom discussion. Using primary source document, written, visual and photographic evidence the teacher sought to develop and build students' abilities in HTS.

#### STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE TEACHING OF HTS

This study was designed to examine what occurred in the classroom on the teaching of HTS and higher order thinking skills. The main aim was to look into students' perception on the instructional methods employed by their teacher to help inculcate HTS. Specifically the objectives of the study were:

1. To identify the students' level of perception of the teaching of HTS.

TABLE 1  
Perception level

Mean score	Perception level
1.00 - 2.33	Low level
2.34 - 3.66	Moderate
3.67 - 5.00	High

2. To determine differences in student's perception towards the teaching of HTS between male and female students.
3. To determine differences in students' perception towards the teaching of HTS of Science and Arts students.

## METHODOLOGY

A survey method using questionnaires was chosen for the study. The respondents comprised eighty (N=80) Form 4 students from SMK Baru Miri (n=40) and SMK Merbau (n=40) in Miri Division, Sarawak. The choice of location was of convenience since a writer of this article was

TABLE 2  
Mean values of students' level of perception on the teaching of HTS

HTS	Item	Mean	Std. dev.
Chronology	Q1. Teacher relates past, present and future events.	3.83	0.973
	Q2. Teacher sequences times and events.	3.75	0.893
	Q3. Teacher identifies changes and progress over time.	3.86	0.910
	Q11. Teacher arranges lessons systematically.	4.05	0.966
	Q27. Teacher shows progress using time lines and sequences of events.	3.56	0.978
Exploring evidence	Q16. Teacher guides students to search for information.	4.07	1.052
	Q18. Teacher participates in activities.	4.12	4.12
	Q19. Teacher encourages the collection of information from primary and secondary sources.	3.52	0.856
	Q20. Teacher uses a variety of resources.	3.89	0.993
	Q22. Teacher uses diverse teaching methods.	3.80	3.80
	Q24. Teacher uses many resources to teach HTS.	4.01	0.947
Interpretation	Q4. Teacher compares resources for factual evidences.	3.94	1.035
	Q5. Teacher generates ideas.	3.64	0.997
	Q7. Teacher analyzes historical events.	3.65	1.007
	Q8. Teacher differentiates facts and interpretations.	3.69	1.038
	Q12. Teacher uses mind maps.	4.15	0.969
	Q21. Teacher uses different learning resources.	3.81	0.901
Imagination	Q14. Teacher creates questions from historical events.	3.75	0.907
	Q17. Teacher guides students to evaluate.	4.02	0.940
	Q23. Teacher asks students to role play.	3.83	0.892
	Q25. Teacher shows historical movies.	3.83	1.141
	Q26. Teacher asks students to imagine.	3.55	1.029
	Q27. Teacher develops empathy.	3.56	0.978
Rationalizing	Q6. Teacher draws conclusion using logics.	3.56	0.979
	Q10. Teacher draws conclusion based on historical evidence.	4.03	0.683
	Q13. Teacher gives rationales for historical events.	3.90	0.963
	Q15. Teacher resolves problems on certain issues raised by historical events.	3.47	1.030
	Q28. Teacher creates situations for discussion.	3.26	1.003
	Q29. Teacher raises questions on critical thinking.	3.70	0.919
	Q30. Teacher tests thinking skills on history.	3.91	1.008

a teacher in one of the schools. The respondents consisting of twenty male and twenty female students from the Science and Arts stream were randomly selected from the two secondary schools. In both schools the history test results in the 2007 Penilaian Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary Assessment) for SMK Baru Miri showed 62.74% students scored Grades A, B, and C while in SMK Merbau 56.85% scored Grades A, B, and C. Female students performed better than male in both schools with 71 female students scored Grades A and B in SMK Baru Miri and 95 female students scored Grades A and B in SMK Merbau. Generally, students with good performance in the PMR are placed in the Science stream. Since history is a core subject, both Science and Arts have to learn history.

Data was collected using a 30-item, 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised two parts: part A is about the demography of respondents. Part B comprised of statements on perception of the teaching of HTS: Chronology (5 items), Exploring Evidence (6 items), Interpretation (6 items), Imagination (6 items), and Rationalizing (7 items). Prior to the data collection, a pilot study of the instrument was conducted with a class of students in a different

school in Miri. The internal consistency of the instrument was found to be at  $r=0.96$  (Cronbach Alpha). The data collected in the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (t-tests). The significance level or alpha was set at  $p=0.05$ . The level of perception of the students on the teaching of HTS was gauged using the following scale.

## RESULTS

### *Students' Level of Perception towards the Teaching of HTS*

Data was analyzed by examining each of the items in the five HTS identified in the history curriculum. The means and standard deviations students' responses for each item on all five HTS namely Chronology, Exploring Evidence, Interpretation, Imagination, and Rationalizing are shown in Table 2. Out of 30 items in the questionnaire, Item 12, "teacher uses mind maps" has the highest mean ( $M=4.15$ ) with  $SD=.969$ . The second highest is Item 18, "teacher participates in activities" ( $M=4.12$  with  $SD=.972$ ), followed by Item 16, "teacher guides students to search for information" ( $M=4.07$  with value of  $SD=1.052$ ). The lowest mean is Item

TABLE 3  
Difference in perception towards the teaching of HTS based on gender

Skills	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	df	t value	P
Chronology	Male	40	3.79	0.63	78	-0.264	0.79
	Female	40	3.83	0.55			
Exploring Evidence	Male	40	3.87	0.67	78	-0.414	0.68
	Female	40	3.93	0.57			
Interpretation	Male	40	3.83	0.58	78	0.300	0.76
	Female	40	3.79	0.58			
Imagination	Male	40	3.66	0.77	78	0.158	0.87
	Female	40	3.63	0.64			
Rationalizing	Male	40	3.85	0.37	78	2.465	0.01*
	Female	40	3.63	0.40			

Significance level  $p=0.05$



TABLE 4  
Difference in perception towards the teaching of HTS based on stream

Skills	Stream	N	Mean	Standard deviation	df	t-value	P
Chronology	Science	40	3.86	0.53	78	0.719	0.47
	Arts	40	3.76	0.63	78		
Exploring	Science	40	3.64	0.64	78	-4.021	0.00*
Evidence	Arts	40	4.16	0.49	78		
Interpretation	Science	40	3.72	0.54	78	-1.465	0.15
	Arts	40	3.91	0.60	78		
Imagination	Science	40	3.58	0.58	78	-0.792	0.43
	Arts	40	3.71	0.80	78		
Rationalizing	Science	40	3.68	0.38	78	-1.340	0.18
	Arts	40	3.80	0.41			

Significance level = 0.05

28, "teacher creates situation for discussions" (M=3.26 with SD=1.003). In general students' perception on the teaching of HTS ranged from moderate to moderately high in all the five HTS.

#### *Students' Perception towards the Teaching of HTS Based on Gender*

Table 3 shows the means of the students' perception toward the teaching of HTS based on gender. The results showed that there was no significant difference on the skills of chronology, exploring evidence, interpretation, and imagination based on gender. Both male and female students' seemed to have similar perceptions of teachers' teaching of HTS. However for the skill of rationalizing, the t-test showed a significant difference in perception towards the teaching of HTS based on gender. Apparently male students have a higher perception (M=3.85) towards rationalizing as compared to female students (M=3.63).

#### *Students' Perception on the Teaching of HTS Based on Stream*

Table 4 shows the results of t-test in perception of the teaching of HTS based on the stream of study.

The finding showed that there was no significant difference on perception of Science and Arts students on four HTS namely chronology, interpretation, imagination, and rationalizing in history learning. However, a close scrutiny revealed that Science seemed more critical in their perception of history teachers with a mean score lower compared to Arts students. For HTS on exploring evidence, the Arts students gave high perception (M=4.16) compared to the Science students (M=3.64).

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study indicate that students in both schools perceived the efforts made by their history teachers in teaching historical thinking skills as moderately high. Data analysis using t-test indicates there was no significant difference in the students' perception of the teaching historical thinking skills between male and female students irrespective of Science or Arts classes. Based on the analysis of the students' perception, it can be inferred that the history teachers in both schools did not fully exhibit strong traits of historical thinking skills in their teaching and learning activities, indicating that they possessed limited ability to "think like

historians". If teachers entering history classes with limited ability in historical thinking skills, then it can be expected that they will not be able to develop the myriad of skills in their students. The finding in this study supported the reports by Zahara and Nik Azleena (2007) on the readiness of teachers to teach historical thinking skills. Their study which involved 114 history teachers in the Dungun Terengganu showed that teacher's readiness with regard to the teaching of historical thinking skills were moderate as a whole. The findings also indicated that there was a significant difference between teachers who were trained to teach history and those who were not (Zahara and Nik Azleena, 2007).

Teachers bring with them to the classrooms their vision of history and how history should be taught. Often this history represents the history they learned in their schooling or university education. Just as students' historical thinking is significant, one can argue that teachers must be prepared to teach historical thinking skills. Whether acting as a facilitator or teaching students step by step in scaffolding methods, they need to know how to teach historical thinking. They must be aware of their own ability to use the appropriate resources, approaches, activities, and to think like historians in order to guide students to success. If teachers enter classroom with a limited vision of history, or without preparation in teaching or helping students to analyze data sources and to think critically about the data, then they cannot be expected to teach higher order thinking or exhibit strong traits of thinking like historians. Administrators, teacher education programs and teachers themselves should be concerned with the development of teachers and that teachers are adequately prepared to teach students to think historically.

In his day, Hall (cited in Wineburg, 2004) promoted two ideas to rectify his concerns about poor teaching of history. First, history teachers should be subject specialists who knew and understood their subject matter, and second, that schools should increase time devoted to historical studies. Hall further argued that teachers should adapt their instructional

methods to the developmental level of their students, including efforts to learn history using an investigative method, a notion that appears similar to the current concept of historical thinking. The findings of this study indicate that history teachers have not diversified their instructional methods to the developmental level and student ability. Apparently teachers used similar strategies and activities to both Science and Arts classes. Wineburg (2001) emphasized that teachers need to use history education as a vehicle to higher level thinking, arguing that history provides a significant opportunity to teach these higher level of critical thinking skills. In this sense, history curriculum and history teaching serve as a means in developing critical and creative thinking skills.

Historical thinking skills involve certain distinct problems that cannot be collapsed into mere generic critical thinking (Seixas and Peck, 2004). In this study, students perceived the skill of imagination being the least emphasized by history teachers. Imagination is important because the history of an event, place, background, time frame, names, and time period will be difficult to visualize if merely words are used. Husband (1996) asserts that the skill of using imagination enables students to enter the minds, and to empathize with the feelings, of those involved in a particular historical event. It is an ability to see and understand the world from a perspective not our own. Imagining must be based on historical evidence if it is to have any meaning. Exercises that ask students to imagine being a medieval knight or a Malay Chieftain of Melaka make no sense unless they have rich information about life during those times.

## CONCLUSION

One must be careful not to extrapolate general conclusions based on a study which focused on a small number of participants as in the present study. This study has examined how students perceived the teaching of historical thinking skills by their history teachers. Nonetheless the findings of this study may provide indications what concur in the classroom regarding the



teaching of historical thinking skills. Accepting the notion that students can learn to think like historians relies on the belief that teachers have the ability to think like historians and are able to guide students through the process. Teachers' ability and preparation determine what is happening in the classroom. Effective teaching of history depends largely on the efforts and approaches of the teacher. Inevitably, history teachers have to be prepared with knowledge and effective skills of teaching history. Teachers also have to listen to the views and opinions of students about their teaching methodologies that can help make history lessons more meaningful and appealing.

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