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Analyzing the Thinking Skills of the Jordanian GSCE's EFL Reading Comprehension Test Items

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Abstract
This study investigated the thinking skills represented on the test items English questions of the Jordanian Secondary Certificate Examinations. The study was conducted by analyzing 260 reading questions of the Jordanian GSCE examinations. The questions were analyzed using the cognitive level of Bloom's Taxonomy. It was found that most question items were dominated by lower-level thinking skills, mainly knowledge and comprehension. It was also found that two higher-order levels were not represented at in the reading section of the examinations. As a result, the study recommended that the thinking levels should be taken into consideration when exams are written. It is also suggest that exam writers be trained on the thinking skills exam questions represent.
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1. Introduction

Education should enable young generations to meet their roles by providing them with knowledge and skills. These knowledge and skills are not confined to mastering subject areas and their application, but they rather should involve higher-order thinking skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and self-management (Council, 2013). Pedagogues realize that creative and critical thinking are essential so that they encourage designing curricula that facilitate teachers to develop those skills in the classroom. The current trend in education emphasizes the implementation of Higher-Order Thinking skills (HOTS) to enhance learners' creative and critical thinking. Conklin (2012) postulated that HOTS are skills that consist of both critical and creative thinking. Moreover, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) stated that HOTS are the skills involving the process of analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Thus, HOTS critical and creative thinking skills can be defined as skills that involve the processes of analysis, evaluation, and creation. The application of higher-order thinking skills is geared by bloom's taxonomy.

It is necessary to build not only lower-order but also higher-order thinking skills which is a part of the 21st century skills and competencies (OECD, 2009). Asking the right question at the appropriate time activates students' thinking and willingness to answer. Reading comprehension is the core of the teaching/learning process in all disciplines. Students cannot understand other disciples if they do not read proficiently and critically. As a result, curricula should emphasize reading comprehension strategies and guide students to read proficiently while. When students acquire these skills by practicing them on various texts, they will be able to transfer them while reading in different disciplines and later while reading outside the school, which is the main goal of teaching HOTS. Sidek (2010, p. 83) asserts that "secondary students may not be prepared for the more difficult cognitive demands of reading tasks in EFL at the tertiary level" if they are only exposed to reading tasks that require low cognitive demands".

Exams, on the other hand, commonly reflect the content of textbooks. A good test should involve the proper thinking skills for the level of the learners. In Jordan, the General Secondary Certificate Exam (GSCE), which is also known as the Tawjihi exam, is considered the school leaving exam, and the university admission exam. The exam is considered a gate to higher education and later to job opportunities. The GSCE is an integral constituent of the Jordanian educational system, and the curriculum is largely oriented towards preparation for testing. The importance of this exam is fixed in the minds of the students throughout the school years. The GSCE is administrated under the supervision of the Ministry of Education where every district administers the GSCE at the same time nationwide. In spite of the large number of public and private universities, a vigorous competition exists because students expect to study certain subjects which may improve getting better jobs upon graduation.

The English Exam consists of two papers; the first one has two main parts: reading comprehension and vocabulary, and the second paper has three main parts: language, literature, and composition. Its structure and content are totally based on the curriculum of the Second Secondary class. Question formats of the GSCE in English include: reading short passages taken from the curriculum, multiple choice items, short-answer questions related to subjects on grammar, and a writing test assessing students' linguistic competence. However, the exam does not involve measuring students' oral skills (i.e. listening and speaking). (Ahmad, 2003).

Questions are crucial for examining students' understanding for the taught material. And through questions, students' thinking skills can be developed Analyzing cognitive processes of questions in textbooks is a source of

useful information to provide teachers, material writers and teacher trainers who want to build students cognitive skills. If the questions in textbooks are not adequate, teachers need to prepare other questions by themselves. To promote student cognitive skills, it is necessary to build teacher's competence of making appropriate cognitive questions. It is crucial to investigate what kind of cognitive skills are expected to be used in the post-reading questions of the present textbooks.

2. Statement of the Problem

The cognitive difficulty of the reading comprehension questions following a text should be in conformity with the ability level of the students that are going to read that text. On the other hand, the cognitive level of the questions in reading comprehension exams should also conform to the cognitive demand of the material they have studied. In light of his experience, the researcher has noticed that part of the Jordanian students' weakness in the reading skill can be attributed to the low level of the after-reading questions posed in the GSCE. In the case of Tawjhi, it is clear that the whole teaching-learning process is affected by the exam. Students start preparing themselves; and families start preparing their kids; and even schools start preparing their students for the exam at very early stages. There have been some studies that investigated levels of questions in textbooks, but only few investigated exam questions. As far as the researcher is involved, no study has tackled the cognitive levels of the reading comprehension questions in the GSCE. It is important to analyze the reading comprehension test items of the GSCE to make sure they fit the level of the students and whether they questions prepare the learners for their future studies and careers. Thus, the analysis of the test items can be done to support the curriculum and enrich the findings in this area.

3. Aim of the Study

The present study aimed to investigate the cognitive levels of the reading comprehension questions represented in the reading section of the Jordanian English GSCE test items between the years 2014 and 2018 using Bloom's revised taxonomy.

4. Question of the Study

This study tried to the following question:

How are the frequencies and percentages of the reading questions in the English language GSCE in Jordan distributed according to the six skills of the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive objective? Is there any significant difference between each cognitive skill of the comprehension questions in the three levels of the GSCE?

5. Significance of the Study

The demand for analyzing the cognitive levels of the reading comprehension questions in the GSCE in this study stems from the importance of the exam being studied. The GSCE is the school leaving exam and the university admission exam in Jordan. Furthermore, the Jordanian GSCE has a cultural connotation and in some cases it affects the cultural acceptance of people in Jordan. Thus, it is of a paramount necessity to analyze the nature of the questions in GSCE exam to find out if the compatibility between the questions asked and the levels of students and the material being taught is realized. Furthermore, As far as the researcher is concerned, no research has dealt with the use of Bloom's taxonomy in the analysis of the thinking levels of any section of the Jordanian GSCE which brings the need for the analysis of the cognitive levels in the reading section of the Jordanian GSCE. Therefore, the analysis of the cognitive levels of the GSCE questions can be very valuable to students, teachers, decision –makers, and curriculum designers.

6. Instrument of the Study

For the purpose of this study a checklist was prepared to record and tally the cognitive levels of the questions collected from the reading section of the GSCE between the years (2014- 2018). The researcher designed a checklist depending on Bloom's Taxonomy of the cognitive domain. The checklist consisted of a table with nine columns including; number of the question; the list of reading questions, the location of the question in the exam sheets and the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy placed in sequence from low to high. The checklist was coupled with some sheets which include the definitions of the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy with examples on each level. Furthermore, the exam sheets from which the questions had taken were also attached with the checklist.

7. Validity of the Instrument

The validity of Bloom's Taxonomy has been determined through theoretical and empirical modes. It was also accepted in educational as a means of categorizing and "determining the thinking levels of educational objectives. Accordingly, the checklist, being directly taken from Bloom's Taxonomy, was considered valid. To further validate the checklist, its areas were first defined accurately. The checklist was also displayed to a panel of five

experts to examine the its content. There was an agreement among the experts respecting the categories and the definitions.

8. Reliability of the Codifying Procedure

Reliability of the checklist depends on the raters' utilization of the instrument. Prior to codifying the questions, a training program was carried out for the rates. The inter-rater reliability was established by three English language instructors other than the researcher. The questions were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher and two other raters. The co-efficient of reliability was calculated and the agreement was 0,86 which is suitable to conduct such a study. Furthermore, in order to establish the intra-reliability of the procedure, all the questions of of the GSCE were codified once more by the researcher after one-month span and the internal consistency of the items was ensured. The degree of consistency between the two codifications was found to be 0.91 based on Cronboch's Alpha.

9. Research Design

This study, basically, followed the descriptive method using content analysis. Quantitative information has been applied such as the frequencies and percentages of the items based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy. The current study utilized the content analysis method to uncover the thinking skills on the reading questions of the GSCE.

10. Research Procedure

The researcher analyzed the reading comprehension questions of the Jordanian GSCE in light of Bloom's Taxonomy's six hierarchical categories of the cognitive domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation). A checklist was prepared to record and tally the number of questions that were categorized at each cognitive level. Information from this checklist was used to see if the questions were relevant to the levels of the students for whom the textbooks were intended and whether the proportions of question in the two sets of textbooks were different or the same. It was expected to find relatively more cognitively demanding questions in the advanced stages of the test. The checklist consisted of all the reading questions numbered of the GSCE between the years 2014 and 2018 ; six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy - knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation and sample questions for each level; and question's keywords. Then, the checklist and the tests were sent to two inter-raters to analyze for the sake of achieving an accepted average of inter-rater reliability. Meanwhile, the reading questions were analyzed by the researcher. After that, the data from the three inter-raters was gathered. In the case of inconsistency, the inter-raters were consulted. Then, the idea and reasons were combined to make sure the finding was reliable. Then, the percentage of occurrence for each level was calculated.

11. Material

Data in this study included all reading questions in the Jordanian GSCE English exams between the years 2014 and 2018. The data were obtained from the website of the Ministry of Education in Jordan. A total number of 260 questions were tabulated. These questions were taken from the three levels of the exams as follows" 86 questions were taken from level two, 96 questions were taken from level three, and 78 questions were taken from level four.

12. Data Analyses

After the test items were obtained, they were analyzed based on cognitive processes of levels of thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy. It is worth mentioning that these levels are further classified as LOTS which cover some skills namely knowledge, understanding and application and HOTS that cover some skills including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The result of the analysis was calculated in the form of percentages.

13. Related Literature

Reading comprehension skill is crucial for learners to develop. The basic aim of reading is to get data from the text being read. Readers should, therefore, use a variety of comprehension skills to help them comprehend the content of the documents. However, literature has showed that there is an insufficiency of higher-level questions and supremacy of lower-level questions in most of English Language course books appointed for learners. As far as the researcher is concerned, no research has dealt with the use of Bloom's taxonomy in the analysis of the thinking levels of any section of the Jordanian GSCE. On the other hand, there are some studies referring to content analysis style which describes the extent of cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy in EFL course books. Lower order thinking skills of Bloom's Taxonomy take place a great deal of emphasis in the course book content analysis of some researchers (Ighbaria, 2013;

Textbooks: (Ighbaria, 2013; Abdelrahman, 2014; Freahat and Smadi, 2014; Olimat, 2015; Ulum, 2016;

Tangsakul, 2017; Maharma, 2018; Adli and Asgar, 2019). Furthermore, some other studies tackled the coverage of Bloom's Taxonomy cognitive domains in tests (Ebadi and Shahbazian, 2015; Dwi Utami, Nurkamto , and Marmanto, 2019).

Ighbaria (2013) analyzed the six units of the 9th grade English textbook *Horizons.* He chose the WH-questions as the unit for analysis. The results revealed that out of the 381 WH-questions that the six units included, a number of 244 questions emphasized lower-order thinking skills and 137 questions emphasizing higher-order thinking skills

Abdelrahman (2014) analyzed the types and levels of questions in Grade 10 English language textbooks used in Jordan during the academic year 2012-2013. The sample involved of 655 questions from the textbooks. The results revealed that most of the questions were within the first two levels; Remembering and Understanding (55.11%), 16.18% for Applying and less for the other levels 28.71%. The results also revealed that the difference were in favor of the low level questions as the percentage was 51.9%.

Freahat and Smadi (2014) analyzed the levels of the reading questions in Action Pack 11, Action Pack 12 textbooks for the secondary stage students and the Headway Plus text for first year university students in Jordan. The results revealed that low-level questions were dominant in both stages, but there was more concentration on higher-level thinking questions in the secondary stage than at the university level.

Ebadi and Shahbazian (2015) investigated the cognitive level of first and second grade of Iranian high-school final exam questions based on Blooms's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. The analysis of questions revealed that all the items of first and second grades were at the first three levels of the taxonomy which was mostly the lower order of thinking. The study also concluded that there was no specific pattern for the frequencies of the questions. Moreover, there was no difference between first and second grade questions with regard to cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

Olimat (2015) analyzed the questions in Action Pack English textbooks based on Bloom's taxonomy for 7^{th}, 8^{th}, 9^{th}, and 10^{th} grades. The results showed that the distribution of questions on the knowledge level was almost the same in 7th, 8th, and 9^{th} grades whereas it was higher on the 10^{th} grade. The analysis of the questions also was better in 10^{th} grade for the application and synthesis levels. The results also showed that 8^{th}, 9^{th} and 10^{th} grades got nearly the same distribution of questions on the knowledge level of Bloom Taxonomy, while the 7^{th} grade got the highest percentage.

Ulum (2016) analyzed the coverage of higher and lower order cognitive skills of Bloom's Taxonomy in the EFL course book Q: Skills for Success 4 Reading and Writing. Findings of the study suggested that the analyzed course book lacked the higher level cognitive skills involved in Bloom's Taxonomy.

Tangsakul (2017) examined 416 reading comprehension questions from Team Up in English 1-3 and 65 reading comprehension questions from O-NET Tests academic years 2013-2016. Bloom's Revised Taxonomy 2001 was used as a framework for analyzing levels of reading comprehension questions. The findings showed that the levels of reading comprehension questions found in Team Up in English 1-3 and Grade 9 English O-NET tests academic years 2013-2016 were similar and were in low levels of reading comprehension questions.

Maharma (2018) analyzed 710 questions in the English language books for the seventh, eighth and ninth grades in Jordan. The results indicated that the concentration of the questions at cognitive levels requiring minimal mental processes, such as knowledge, comprehension, and based on the results.

Adli and Asgar (2019) investigated the reading comprehension questions and their appropriateness in four elementary and advanced level EFL textbooks. Results indicated that there are significant differences between the two proficiency levels in terms of question types in all categories except analysis and synthesis.

Dwi Utami, Nurkamto , and Marmanto (2019) analyzed four sets of test items from a senior high school in Indonesia from 2016 to 2019 using Bloom's revised taxonomy. The researchers found that most questions were dominated by lower-order thinking skills, specifically understanding level. However, the higher-order thinking skill was the only skill of analyzing while the skills of evaluating or creating were never used.

Soleimani and Kheiri (2019) examined the level of Iranian MA and PhD testing classes. The results showed that lower order thinking skills were used more than medium thinking skills in MA testing classroom activities, but higher order thinking skills were never used. On the other hand, medium order thinking skills were used more than higher order thinking skills in PhD testing classroom activities, and lower order thinking skills were not covered.

As it is clearly evident, all these studies studied questions in textbooks, examinations, or questions posed by teachers in class, and most of these studies used Bloom's taxonomy as a guide for categorizing questions based on the levels of cognitive domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). The results of these studies showed that the majority of the questions emphasized the knowledge level or the second level of comprehension despite the fact that the studies were conducted at different times, ranging from the 2013 to 2019.

The present study is similar to the former related studies in analyzing the questions according to Bloom's taxonomy and adopting the analytical descriptive approach. For the researcher's knowledge, the study is different

from the former related studies because it is conducted on the English questions included in general secondary exams in Jordan during the period (2014-3018).

14. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the analysis results of 260 reading after-questions of the Jordanian GSCE between the years 2014 and 2018 are presented. According to the previous studies, the majority of the analyzed questions are those with lower-order thinking skills (Ighbaria, 2013; Abdelrahman, 2014; Freahat and Smadi, 2014; Olimat, 2015; Ulum, 2016; Tangsakul, 2017; Maharma, 2018; Adli and Asgar, 2019). Other studies on the cognitive levels of test items showed the same results (Ebadi and Shahbazian, 2015; Dwi Utami, Nurkamto , and Marmanto, 2019). Supported by previous studies, the vast majority of the IGSCE's reading questions between the years 2014 and 2018 represent lower-cognitive thinking skills. To be more detailed, the frequencies and percentages of test items and the cognitive levels covered are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of thinking skills in GSCE's reading comprehension test items in the academic years of 2014 to 2018

	Level 2		Level 3		Level 4		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	%
Knowledge	56	65%	52	54%	43	55%	58%
Comprehension	29	34%	21	22%	16	21%	25%
Application	0	0%	11	11%	10	13%	7.5%
Analysis	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Synthesis	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Evaluation	1	1%	12	13%	9	12%	7.5%
Total	86	100%	96	100%	78	100%	100%

* n = *number of questions based on the indicator found in the test items*
** % = *percentage of test items*

Based on the table, it appears that the thinking skills which are represented on the reading test items are the skills of knowledge, comprehension, application, and evaluation. All the lower-thinking skills are covered on the test items sets. On the other hand, for higher-order thinking skills, the skill represented on the test items set is only the skill of evaluation. The skill mostly used is the skill of knowledge which is represented by 58% and the percentages between the three levels of IGSCE are all above 54%. The second most used skill is the skill of comprehension which is represented by 25%. The skills of application and evaluation were represented with the same percentage 7.5%. However, the skill of application was only represented in the higher IBSCE levels and was not spotted at level 2. Likewise, evaluation was only represented with a percentage of 1% at level 2 and was represented with 13% and 12% at levels 3 and 4 respectively. Furthermore, the two skills of analysis and synthesis were not represented in all levels of the IGSCE at all. The table also shows that there is a variation between the three levels of IGSCE in terms of the numbers and percentages of the cognitive levels of the questions. Level Two shows the majority of the questions in knowledge and comprehension skills with percentages of 65 and 34 respectively whereas the rest of the skills are almost not represented at all save for 1 question at the level of evaluation. Likewise, the representation of the reading questions of Level Three shows the majority of the questions in the skills of knowledge and comprehension with percentages of 54 and 22 respectively. Level Three has a better representation of the two skills of application and evaluation with percentages of 11% and 13% respectively. However, analysis and synthesis skills are not represented in the test items. Likewise, the majority of reading questions of Level Four are in the knowledge and comprehension skills with percentages of 55% and 25% respectively. Application and evaluation were represented with the same percentage of questions 7.5% each. However, analysis and synthesis skills are not represented in the test items. Table 2 below shows the frequencies and percentages of the lower higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and the lower-order thinking skills LOTS in the reading comprehension questions in the three levels of IGSCE in Jordan. It is worth mentioning that LOTS include the skills of knowledge, comprehensions and application whereas HOTS include the skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of lower and higher-thinking skills in GSCE's reading comprehension test items in the academic years of 2014 to 2018

	Level 2		Level 3		Level 4	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
LOTS	85	99%	84	87%	69	88%
HOTS	1	1%	12	13%	9	12%
TOTAL	86	100%	96	100%	78	100%

Table 2 reveals that the lower-order thinking skills covering the skills of knowledge, comprehensions and application dominates compared to higher-order thinking skills. Higher-level thinking skills are almost not

represented in Level two. It is worth mentioning that level wo of IGSCE in Jordan is oriented to those who join the vocational streams and those who target the community colleges. Students who do the test at this level do not continue to set for the English exam of the other two levels. This would somehow justify why the questions at this level are low-level ones. Levels three and four are the ones of the second secondary grade whose participants would target the universities. However, the representation of the HOTS does not in any way indicate the level of the learners or the level of the stage. No wonder, therefore, that university instructors complain of the low level of a great percentage students who join the universities in Jordan.

15. Conclusion

Concerning the thinking skills represented on the reading comprehension section of the Jordanian IGSCE test items, it is shown that lower-order thinking skills are dominant compared to the higher-order thinking skills. Noticeably, in the higher-order thinking skills, there is only the skill of evaluation represented on the test items while the skills of analysis and synthesis are not found. The questions regarding knowledge skill are on the top as it is found that more than 50% of the questions on the test item sets. It can be safely said that the reading questions of the Jordanian IGSCE Exams between the years 2014 and 2018 are knowledge-based questions, the rest are comprehension, application and evaluation. Therefore, it is suggested that a complete revision should be conducted for the levels of the thinking skills represented in the reading section of the English language IGSCE Exam in Jordan. Consequently, the level of the thinking skills of the questions in all aspects and language skills should also be revised. Furthermore, the thinking levels that each exam question tackles should be made a priority. There is no doubt in light of the findings that some of the test writers have no idea about what thinking levels exam questions should target. Accordingly, it is suggested that the Ministry of Education should train the language teachers and exam writers to be able to deal with the thinking levels of the questions.

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