

INVOLVEMENT OF HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS WITHIN A PREPARATORY COURSE FOR THE MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY ENGLISH TEST

Sean Harley Lee Allen

Lee Ee Wern

University of Malaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was introduced in 1999 to bridge gaps between secondary and tertiary English language needs, primarily in language proficiency. Since it is a key entrance examination for local universities, a review of the updated 2007 syllabus was important. This study's goal was to determine the absence or presence of higher-order thinking skills within the MUET preparation course. Focus was on the syllabus and teaching-learning techniques. Data were collected from 55 students participating in the English language matriculation program through a comprehensive questionnaire, an in-depth interview with one experienced instructor, as well as an examination of the syllabus and textbook selected for the Malaysian University English Test preparation course. Participant observation and data triangulation substantiated findings, revealing low synthesis skill use concerning MUET candidates. Instructor directed lessons involved synthesis, while syllabus emphasis on the skill was minimized.

Introduction

Today's rapidly changing world increasingly requires cognitive skills to be taught to individuals, especially critical thinking skills, which are essential tools for dealing with many situations in today's environment as well as being necessary in leadership development (McKown, 1997). Modern English language teaching in Malaysia calls for higher-order thinking skills that are aimed at "developing the cognitive aspect of the individual learner" (Ismail & Hassan, 2009, p.234) in view of the National Education Philosophy which aims to produce well-adjusted individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced.

Mastering higher-order thinking skills at the tertiary educational level is essential in order to meet employers' continually increasing demands for independent, problem-solving employees in addition to the basic language skills relating to listening, speaking, reading and writing. It was the intent of this study to review the

syllabus of the preparatory English language course since the MUET is a language entry requirement for pre-university students intending to secure local university enrollment. This research was conducted during semester one in the 2009/2010 term based on the University of Malaya English language matriculation programme. The 55 students chosen for this study were participating in this program to determine qualification for placement within the university. The syllabus and textbook analysed were the chosen materials used in the Malaysian University English Test preparation course at the time this research was conducted. This paper analyzes the current MUET preparation course set by the Malaysian Examinations Council (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia) to evaluate the absence or presence of higher-order thinking skills.

Objective of the Study

The need to teach higher level cognitive skills is significant due to a lack of the necessary ability of students to perform critical thinking and problem solving tasks to meet modern professional demands and fully participate in society (Idol & Jones, 1991). According to Ramlan (2007), there is an insufficient amount of research that thoroughly looks into university students' critical thinking abilities. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the absence or presence of higher-order thinking skills in the preparation for the MUET course. This research focuses specifically on the syllabus with the textbook as a cross reference and teaching-learning techniques. Although MUET is a compulsory university entrance exam implemented by the Malaysian Examinations Council, no specific preparatory textbook is defined. However, the selected textbook chosen for the preparatory English language course involved in this study, *Effective Practice MUET*, was published by Oxford Fajar Sdn. Bhd. and functioned as a primary source for the MUET preparation.

Significance of the Study

Analysis of the collected data may enable Malaysian tertiary education bodies to better prepare their future graduates with greater competency in critical thinking, problem solving, and effective decision making. This may be accomplished by assisting instructors to focus on thinking skills which are more valuable and challenging to students rather than fully concentrating on test-taking strategies (Lee & Wong, 2001). In addition, students could have the opportunity to incorporate higher level thinking with their English language learning which may aid their development as independent thinkers while enhancing basic language skills.

Review of Literature

Underdeveloped cognitive abilities among graduates may be seen as an obstacle in a global hiring environment. A case study conducted by the National Research Institute for Higher Education or Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara (IPPTN,

2006) suggests that graduates' academic qualifications and content knowledge of their specialization alone are not enough to secure jobs. An emerging workforce needs the ability to utilize communication skills effectively, analyze information requiring critical evaluations, as well as negotiate and collaborate effectively in English.

Language skill competency has been identified as a limiting factor in successful employment of Malaysian graduates (Kaur et al., 2008). The findings of the study that involved 38 students enrolled in a preparatory course for the MUET revealed that although there were compulsory English language classes in both primary and secondary school, the Malaysian learners maintained achieved low levels of lexical competency which increased their consequent struggle with later academic coursework.

A study conducted by Marwan (2009) involved the investigation of a single English for Specific Purposes class and focused on what the teacher faced with regard to achievement and performance. A semi-structured interview was used in the study to help determine challenges present during course operation. This qualitative analysis involved comments from one teacher concerning students' language competencies and motivation influence student performance.

A related in-depth study conducted in the United States during April and May 2006 by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management highlights findings from a detailed survey of 431 human resource officials that revealed critical thinking and problem solving skills were rated among the top five 'very important' skills out of 11 applied skills for college graduates. However, 70% of the total 431 employer respondents consider high school graduates 'deficient' in critical thinking and problem solving (Casner & Barrington, 2006). In the 21st century, people need to be critical thinkers to effectively make decisions.

Definition of Terms

Assessment of the MUET preparation is conducted using Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives as a framework. According to Bloom et al. (1971), higher-order thinking includes the following upper 3 levels of cognition:

(i) Analysis

Emphasizes a breakdown of whole concepts into constituent parts and identifies relationships of the parts and of the way they are organized.

(ii) Synthesis

Putting parts together to form a whole and emphasizes combining them in such a way as to create a new pattern or structure.

(iii) Evaluation

Makes judgments about the value of ideas or materials involving use of criteria and standards for appraising the extent to which particulars are accurate or satisfying.

Background to the MUET

MUET was first launched in 1999 and administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council. This test is compulsory for students intending to pursue tertiary education at local public universities. This test is held biannually, mid-year in April/May and year-end in October/November. New test specifications were officially introduced in March 2007 and are applicable for the end-2008 MUET and the MUET thereafter whilst old test specifications still apply with MUET exams prior to mid-2008. Test results are based on an aggregate score ranging from zero to three hundred (0 to 300). Scores are then banded into six levels of achievement (Bands 1 to 6), Band 1 being the lowest and Band 6 the highest.

Description of MUET

The MUET is designed to measure students' English language proficiency. It consists of four components, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. This course assists students in enhancing their listening skills, developing effective communication skills, improving critical reading of academic texts, and building essay writing skills, as well as interpreting information from non-linear sources.

Methodology

This study focuses on determining the absence or presence of higher-order thinking skills within the syllabus, textbook, and teaching-learning techniques used by the Malaysian University English Test preparation course when this research was done.

Theoretical framework

Using Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives to define higher-order thinking, the researchers developed (a) in-depth interview questions with higher-order thinking skills content in mind, and (b) a student questionnaire to determine techniques used in approaching the MUET preparatory tasks.

Participants

In order to access the use of HOTS in the preparatory course, 55 MUET candidates were randomly chosen as a representative sample of subjects to describe the use of higher-order thinking in their learning process through a distributed

questionnaire in order to obtain the primary corpus of data. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the Head English Language Teacher who worked in the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics. This individual had been working as an English teacher for 23 years and provided experienced input through the collected data. The Head English Language Teacher had been both conducting classes in the matriculation programme as well as overseeing organization. This supplementary data gained from the hands-on knowledge of an experienced teacher in the programme provided essential reference to student performance outside the sampling observed for this study. The reliability and validity of the primary data was supported by the addition of the interview conducted since confirmation of skills application was justified through the course of the discussion and also functioned as a means in triangulating the overall research conducted.

Research instruments

The instruments used to acquire data consisted of a comprehensive questionnaire distributed to 55 students and an in-depth interview performed with one experienced instructor as well as document analysis. Data processing was conducted using Bloom's taxonomy as a guide in the analysis of the preparatory English language course's selected textbook and as a cross reference for verification of syllabus content. Permission was obtained to conduct the interview and to collect questionnaire responses.

Interview

The in-depth interview consists of four parts. Part A deals with listening, Part B covers speaking, Part C relates to reading, and Part D details writing skills. The interview comprises twelve questions about instructor's perspectives and teaching practices for the MUET preparation. An hour was used for the interview session.

(i) Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of two sections and four parts. Section one includes the purpose and directions for completing the form. Section two categorizes subjects. Part A details listening, Part B covers speaking, Part C is for reading, and Part D surveys writing skills. Respondents were allocated 15 minutes to answer the questions. All respondents to the questionnaire remained anonymous to facilitate a greater degree of objectivity concerning responses.

A pilot questionnaire was prepared and tested on 10 students initially. After the trial, a short discussion session was held with the volunteer students to elicit feedback

on comprehension and structure of the questions. Once the volunteers provided a commentary on the trial questionnaire, the results of the pilot investigation were reviewed and discussed with the Head English Language Teacher in order to gain further insights and feedback. Once all the comments and suggestions were taken into account, a revision of the questionnaire was drafted and prepared for the sample group.

(ii) *MUET syllabus/test specifications document and course textbook*

Test specifications classified based on the syllabus and the selected MUET preparatory course textbook were scrutinized against the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in Bloom's Taxonomy in order to determine a reference point and ascertain the presence or absence of higher cognitive skills usage.

(iii) *Participant observation*

Participant observation was conducted by both researchers involved in this project over the course of the study.

Results and Discussion

Syllabus/Test specifications

The following table indicates that the *listening* component exhibits the presence of higher-order thinking. Student assessment involved Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs), information transfer, and short-answer questions, allowing critical analysis of ideas through evaluative discrimination.

Student situational communication ability is assessed in the *speaking* section, reflecting the objective of developing their individual and group interaction skills. The utilization of higher-order thinking through task creation enables students to present viewpoints by expressing opinions and arguments clearly in varied social situations.

The *reading* component measures students' ability to distinguish facts from opinions. The test consists entirely of MCQs. Even so as Lee (2004) states, with MCQs, the test can only exhibit how well a reader has done on the test but it doesn't indicate the candidate's reading ability or fluency or reading behavior beyond test contexts. This is crucial to develop academic literacy among students given the fact that reading is a significant part of education in acquiring new knowledge and ideas.

Comprising interpretive analysis and description, the *writing* component enables candidates' thinking ability such as distinguishing main ideas from supporting

details to be assessed. This mirrors the goal of the MUET language learning which is to develop students' writing skills and their ability to interpret information from linear and non-linear sources.

Although the presence of higher-order thinking is assessed throughout all four basic skills, limitation of emphasis on synthesis skills may result in students' lacking in creative skills as highlighted in the following table.

Table 1: Syllabus/Test Specifications

Syllabus/Test specifications		Thinking skills*
Listening		
Understanding language functions	-	Analysis
Distinguishing the relevant from the irrelevant	-	Analysis
Distinguishing fact from opinion	-	Analysis
Drawing inferences	-	Analysis
Identifying roles and relationship	-	Analysis
Following the development of a point or an argument	-	Synthesis
Summarizing information	-	Synthesis
Appraising information	-	Evaluation
Making judgments	-	Evaluation
Recognizing and interpreting speakers' views, attitudes or intentions	-	Evaluation
Speaking		
Using appropriate markers and linking devices	-	Analysis
Comparing and contrasting	-	Analysis
Expressing relationships	-	Analysis
Classifying	-	Analysis
Developing and organizing ideas	-	Synthesis
Giving opinions	-	Evaluation/ Analysis
Presenting relevant ideas	-	Evaluation/ Analysis
Giving reasons	-	Evaluation
Making suggestions and recommendations	-	Evaluation

Stating and justifying points of view	-	Evaluation
Presenting an argument	-	Evaluation
Expressing agreement and disagreement	-	Evaluation

Reading

Understanding language functions	-	Analysis
Distinguishing the relevant from the irrelevant	-	Analysis
Distinguishing fact from opinion	-	Analysis
Making inferences	-	Analysis
Relating ideas and concepts, summarizing information	-	Synthesis
Following the development of a point or an argument	-	Synthesis
Appraising information	-	Evaluation
Making judgments	-	Evaluation
Recognizing and interpreting writers' views, attitudes or intentions	-	Evaluation

Writing

Using appropriate markers and linking devices	-	Analysis
Comparing and contrasting	-	Analysis
Expressing relationships	-	Analysis
Classifying	-	Analysis
Developing and organizing ideas	-	Synthesis
Giving opinions	-	Evaluation/Analysis
Presenting relevant ideas	-	Evaluation/Analysis
Giving reasons	-	Evaluation
Making suggestions and recommendations	-	Evaluation
Stating and justifying points of view	-	Evaluation
Presenting an argument	-	Evaluation
Expressing agreement and disagreement	-	Evaluation

*Note: * Classification of specific thinking skills is based on Bloom's taxonomy (1971)*

Teaching-Learning Technique

i. Questionnaire

Questionnaire data revealed that students exhibited the ability to analyze and evaluate while learning. However, the utilization of these skills was less than 50% in listening, speaking, reading and writing. As highlighted in the following chart, students displayed minimal ability to synthesize in their learning, marked by the lowest percentages in all four skills (listening: 19%, speaking: 21%, reading: 15% and writing: 24%). The result implies students' inability to put together elements in order to creatively form a new pattern or structure (Bloom et al., 1971). In connection with this standpoint, Palaniappan (2000) confirms that creative thinking is rarely emphasized in teaching, learning, and assessment although the Malaysian Ministry of Education has highlighted its importance through the incorporation of creative thinking skills and activities in the curriculum and textbooks. Besides, Malaysian graduates' "marketability" is typically low because of a deficiency in creative and critical thinking skills which leads to not meeting foreign employers' preferences (Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia, 2009).

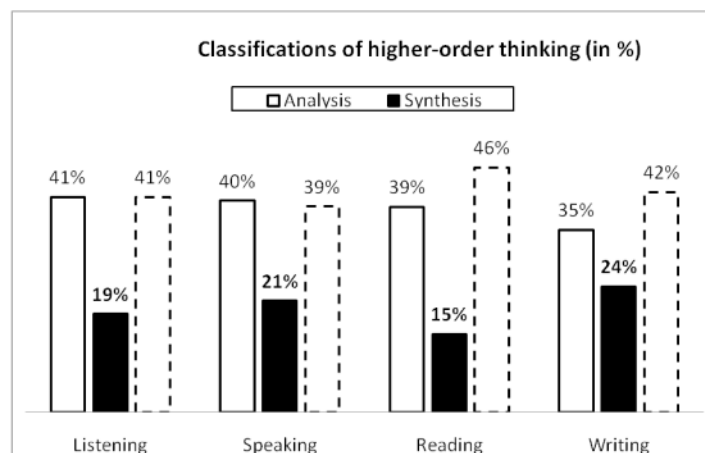


Figure 1: Classifications of higher-order thinking

ii. Interview

Qualitative interpretation of the instructor interview was conducted using a key word matching analysis with the framework of Bloom's Taxonomy. Interpretation of interview data revealed the lecturer's pedagogic approach and student learning strategies displayed competence mainly in analysis and evaluation. A need for

continued skill development within the area of synthesis was determined, with quantitative results verifying that synthesis skill needs the most review.

- ***Analysis***

In respect to *listening*, students showed an ability to gather information and analyze individual pieces with their existing knowledge. The instructor incorporated strategic skills of identifying and clarifying the purpose within listening samples, then verifying through classroom interaction if the students recognized what to look for and then determined if they needed assistance. With regard to *speaking*, instructor involvement focused on breakdown of material into constituent parts for recognition of its interrelation. Students displayed recognition of key elements and adequately analyzed them through their presentation of material. *Reading* was broken down pedagogically into a sectional method of analysis by moving from cursory scanning to complex interaction with text which resulted in student involvement with passages they worked with through active relationships with the reading material. For *writing* assignments, instructional guidance was provided by the lecturer to facilitate development of student ability to distinguish interrelated ideas, facts, and opinion in written work they produced. It could then be seen whether or not they possessed adequate understanding of how to connect ideas or present non-linear information in an organized and cohesive fashion in the completed tasks.

- ***Evaluation***

Listening involved instructor observation of student ability to determine individual performance, and verification was conducted when work was reviewed. Student application of higher order reasoning skills was utilized in order for them to discriminate between nonessential and key points. The same applied to *speaking* where involvement was the method of instruction employed in order to draw the class into a peer evaluation exercises. Consequently, the students made strong evaluations through self expression and used supporting comments to defend their positions. *Reading* strategies were covered throughout the entire course and student expectations of skill utilization are evident through their performance. Open-ended topics in *writing* assignments helped the instructor generate classroom discussion which prompted the students to make value judgments on common issues. Students also displayed understanding in making choices concerning topics by showing how they interpret their available material and evaluate what information to provide.

- ***Synthesis***

In respect to *listening*, the following comment from the lecturer interview detailed that student experience limited the capability of testing, "...personal experience, you know in other words, you cannot really test this kind of thing in

particular...”, which functions in conjunction with the ability to utilize synthesis. Student-centered production of ideas is the centre point in synthesis development and as stated by the lecturer too much involvement influences spontaneity of speaking exercises.

“You can put in more, a person must have must be something like this for testing purposes that is, but uh, doing that might just clutter their mind a bit, and uh, you end with something that’s not quite genuine, or authentic...”

Observation by the instructor can be noted as being sensitive to the students’ needs while at the same time understanding where continued instruction is needed in order to maximize skill development with *reading* portions. In corroboration with statistical data, *writing* was considered by the instructor, “...a good way of testing synthesis regarding or related to whatever issues given to them.”, although it still registered as one of the lesser developed abilities.

iii. Participant observation

Through the process of the study, both researchers participated in observation of class activity to strengthen the cross analysis. It could be verified that the assignments students were required to perform challenged their abilities in respect to the addressed higher order thinking skills. Synthesis in particular was determined by the researchers to have been included within the syllabus and accompanied course texts to some degree, but was in need of improvement with respect to student capability. Exercises that were submitted by the pre-university candidates exhibited a marginal display of skill development in synthesis. The researchers concluded that further emphasis on synthesis skill building is needed.

Limitation of the Study

This study focused on the absence or presence of higher-order thinking only within the syllabus and teaching-learning techniques to develop a greater depth of understanding in these two aspects to avoid a simple cursory review. This project functioned efficiently as a pilot study to identify areas of research that could be examined more thoroughly through future analysis. The sampling of the 55 MUET candidates and interview with a single department head teacher also lend to the functionality of this as a qualitative pilot study and not as an in-depth analysis of a majority of classroom conditions and the use of HOTS. Continuous assessment of student progress over the course of a semester along with data gathering from official MUET exams could prove useful in a larger scale project and would be

beneficial to academic establishments in terms of greater identification of student educational needs.

Implications and Conclusion

This programme involves primarily pre-university matriculation students who, for the most part, enter the preparation course with a form 5 English proficiency level. The ability to interact in the English language at the necessary level upon entrance into the university system is the primary requirement and is the main goal of preparing students for the MUET examination. In order to achieve this, the four basic skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing need to continue to be addressed within the syllabus and teaching-learning strategies. In addition, increased focus on the higher order thinking skills of analysis, evaluation, and especially synthesis needs to be conducted for the benefit of student development. If the syllabus and teaching-learning strategies maintain the improvement of these skills with added attention to synthesis, it may help to increase the basic language proficiency and cognitive abilities of those working on entering the educational system.

Through triangulation of data results, it was determined that synthesis was not primarily evident in syllabus construction or student utilization, although instructor involvement attempted encouragement of idea generation. It is the recommendation of the researchers that more emphasis on synthesis should be considered in syllabus construction to assist instructor facilitation and help to illuminate student needs more clearly. If a syllabus revision is entertained, incorporation of greater use of synthesis skills would naturally lend to student creative engagement as well as channel lecturers' class direction towards observation of global classroom needs rather than specific skill maintenance.

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APPENDIX

Interview

Listening

Analysis

How do the students analyze the audio segments?

Synthesis

How do the students show their ability to synthesize during the listening activities?

Evaluation

How do the students make accurate judgments of the key information they identified from the listening samples?

Speaking

Analysis

How do the students conduct analysis of given topics in order to develop supporting information?

Synthesis

What activities are used to engage the principles of synthesis with group speaking tasks?

Evaluation

When do the students show ability to make judgments concerning group tasks?

Reading

Analysis

In what ways do students exhibit their understanding of the interrelationships within reading segments?

Synthesis

How do students use their personal perspective to summarize ideas in an organized fashion from a reading assignment?

Evaluation

How do students show they are evaluating the passages they read in order to determine the necessary answers?

Writing

Analysis

When preparing reports, how do students identify the facts in their papers and differentiate them from their opinions?

Synthesis

How do students use synthesis to generate ideas for their opinion-based writing assignments?

Evaluation

How do students logically support and defend the development of their ideas?

Questionnaire

Listening

Analysis

Q1. How do you recognize connections among ideas between paragraphs when you listen to them?

- (A) By first writing down the entire text and then create a separate version of it that matches the original.
- (B) By recognizing that the speaker of the text is the same for all paragraphs.
- (C) By recognizing the consistency and similarity of subject matter to a main topic.
- (D) By translating all of the main parts of the passage.

Synthesis

Q2. How can you make new information that relates to a listening exercise?

- (A) By adding dictionary definitions to difficult words.
- (B) By adding information that is from a personal experience to make it more meaningful.
- (C) You only write down key points and do not add information.

- (D) Combine the original audio segment with another audio sample to make the original one longer.

Evaluation

- Q3. When listening to a passage, how do you choose which ideas are more important to write down?
- (A) Everything is important. Therefore, it is essential to write down every single thing.
 - (B) By copying them into a list and then number the ideas from most important to least important.
 - (C) By selecting words which are descriptive and have a highly technical sound.
 - (D) By evaluating the main idea in relation to supporting ideas to decide if the information is appropriate.

Speaking

Analysis

- Q4. When explaining an idea, how can you show you understand a cause-and-effect relationship?
- (A) Choose answers that seem the most likely based on the main idea.
 - (B) By analyzing the relationship of available evidence and then distinguish between cause and effect.
 - (C) Guess which bit of evidence is a cause and then decide that the rest of the information is the effects of that point.
 - (D) The effect of the cause is first determined and then the cause of the effect is automatically revealed.

Synthesis

- Q5. How do you explain your own thoughts about a topic in a way that makes it different from others'?
- (A) Take already understood ideas from related topics and create an idea that may not have been talked about before.
 - (B) Say more words than everyone else.
 - (C) Produce complex structure and content to make overall description unique.
 - (D) Give definitions and factual evidence to support your ideas.

Evaluation

- Q6. How do you choose what points are important to defend a topic?
- (A) Come up with judgments that explain the significance of ideas to show why they are important.
 - (B) Keep talking about the topic in order to explain more about the topic.
 - (C) If the topic is important then any point is also important.
 - (D) By describing the topic with facts and technical terms.

Reading

Analysis

- Q7. How are you able to know there may be related information that is not stated in a reading text?
- (A) Compare actual statements in a passage to make a conclusion that relates to the overall subject.
 - (B) By knowing the information is not stated in the required reading.
 - (C) There is never unstated information in passages of text.
 - (D) By being able to find the main idea of the text.

Synthesis

- Q8. How are you able to make generalizations from a given passage?
- (A) By selecting the key points in the text.
 - (B) By knowing the topic sentence in the first paragraph.
 - (C) Combine main ideas with your knowledge and experiences you already have to form a structure.
 - (D) By being able to recall the main idea of the text.

Evaluation

- Q9. How do you make an accurate judgment of the key ideas you identify from the reading text?
- (A) Consider the importance of ideas or facts, then compare the importance with what is available from the text.
 - (B) By describing the main ideas with examples.
 - (C) By selecting the key points based on your personal experience.
 - (D) Write down the key ideas.

Writing

Analysis

- Q10. How do you distinguish between main ideas and supporting details in report writing?
- (A) By knowing the main ideas.
 - (B) Explain each main idea with examples.
 - (C) There is no difference between main ideas and supporting details.
 - (D) Break information into parts, then compare these parts based on their relationships.

Synthesis

- Q11. How do you effectively write an essay for an opinion-based writing assignment?
- (A) Use any personal knowledge of a topic and make it new by putting it in your own words.

- (B) Tell the instructors what you feel they want to hear, which is probably the right answer.
- (C) Write a topic sentence and then develop three supporting points and end with a conclusion.
- (D) Keep writing until you have the required number of words.

Evaluation

Q12. How do you make judgments about a topic to choose which supporting ideas are important to present that subject?

- (A) Continue to write until you have the adequate number of supporting points.
- (B) Make a list of key words that relates to the topic and then expand on the key words with sentences.
- (C) Compare supporting information with the main idea and evaluate the information, then keep or remove it depending on its importance.
- (D) All information is important.