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TEACHERS' QUESTIONING IN THE TEACHING OF READING COMPREHENSION

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

FACULTY OF LANGUAGES
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

14.06.2010 ----------

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ABSTRACT

'Teachers Questioning In The Teaching of Reading Comprehension' was a study aimed at categorising the types of questions according to the cognitive levels in Barrett's Taxonomy of reading comprehension; determining the frequencies of lower-order questions versus higher-order questions; identifying the questioning strategies employed by the teachers; and investigating teachers' views on questioning. Using the Multiple Case Single Site Design, the study was conducted at one of the schools in Selayang with three English Language teachers of Form Four who were selected using the purposive sampling method. Observations were carried throughout five weeks followed by individual in-depth interviews. Two instruments were developed to collect data; a self-developed observational checklist (containing all the five thinking levels in Barrett's Taxonomy for reading comprehension) and an interview protocol. Frequency counts were made on the data obtained from the observational checklists whereas the data from the interviews were coded. The findings revealed that teachers more frequently asked questions of lower-order thinking as compared to questions of higher-order thinking. From this study, English language teachers will hopefully pose more higher-order questions to elevate their students' thinking. The Ministry of Education may on the other hand be able to investigate the reasons teachers place a superior emphasis upon exam-oriented questions.

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ABSTRAK

‘Penyoalan Guru Dalam Pengajaran Pemahaman’ merupakan kajian yang mempunyai objektif untuk mengkategorikan jenis-jenis soalan berpandukan tahap-tahap kognitif dalam Taksonomi Pemahaman Barrett; menentukan frekuensi soalan-soalan tahap pemikiran rendah berbanding soalan tahap pemikiran tinggi; mengenalpasti strategi-strategi penyoalan yang digunakan oleh guru-guru ketika waktu pengajaran pemahaman; dan menyiasat pandangan guru-guru berkenaan penyoalan secara am. Berasaskan rekabentuk satu tapak kajian dan pelbagai kes, kajian kes ini dilaksanakan di salah sebuah sekolah di Selayang dengan tiga orang guru Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan Empat yang dipilih menggunakan kaedah persampelan bertujuan. Pemerhatian dilakukan sepanjang tempoh lima minggu diikuti dengan temubual-terperinci berindividu. Dua instrumen kajian yang digunakan untuk mengumpul data adalah; senarai semak pemerhatian (mengandungi kesemua lima tahap pemikiran dalam Taksonomi Pemahaman Barrett) dan protokol temu-bual. Pengiraan kekerapan dibuat ke atas data yang diperolehi melalui senarai semak pemerhatian manakala data yang diperolehi melalui temu-bual dianalisis menggunakan proses pengkodan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan guru-guru lebih kerap menanya soalan-soalan tahap pemikiran rendah berbanding dengan soalan-soalan tahap pemikiran tinggi. Melalui kajian ini, guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris diharap dapat mengajukan soalan-soalan tahap pemikiran tinggi dengan lebih kerap agar dapat meningkatkan tahap pemikiran para pelajar. Kementerian Pelajaran pula akan dapat menyiasat sebab-sebab guru lebih menekankan soalan-soalan berorientasikan peperiksaan berbanding jenis-jenis soalan yang dapat membantu pemikiran tahap tinggi.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

O1	Observation 1
O2	Observation 2
O3	Observation 3
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
T1	Teacher 1
T2	Teacher 2
T3	Teacher 3
TO	Total

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Questioning is the fundamental part of every lesson. Questioning has been described by Harvey and Goudvis (as cited in James & Carter, 2006) as the master key to understanding. According to Wragg and Brown (2001), questions are asked to stimulate recall, to deepen understanding, to develop imagination and to encourage problem solving. A similar view is also shared by Clifford and Marinucci (2008) who feel that questioning has become an important way to check for information recall and to ascertain that the student is "on the right track". Without questioning, teachers would be unable to gauge their students' understanding and level of proficiency. When we stop questioning, we stop learning and growing (McKenzie, 2004). Price and Nelson (2007) claim that teachers use questions to provide review, rehearsal, and enrichment of the information being presented and thereafter to monitor students' understanding of the information.

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Numerous writers believe that, questioning is one of the best ways to promote student's understanding of a text. Questions trigger students to think from various perspectives of a text. Asking questions helps students to understand the text read better. This view is also advocated by Groisser (1964) who claims that other than promoting understanding, questions are posed to test a pupil's preparation for the lesson. This opinion is further strengthened by Fisher and Frey (2009) who say that questioning is crucial to checking for understanding, especially as it is relevant to giving feedback on inaccurate responses.

One of the significant tasks of critical thinking according to Carter, Bishop, and Kravits (2000) is asking important questions about ideas and information. Groisser (1964) agrees to this view too, when he mentioned that questions are used to stimulate logical or critical thinking. Sanders (1966) upholds that teachers can guide students to all kinds of thinking through meticulous application of questions. This in other words means that, when questions are asked, students' minds engage in the process of searching for their answers. Wallace (2001) on the other hand is of the view that students can be encouraged to raise their own questions about texts rather than answering provided questions. Similarly, Morgan and Saxton (2006) think that active participation of students in the lesson means they do not only receive and absorb knowledge and information but work vigorously and ask questions.

Reading is one of the four essential English language skills that involves questioning. In Malaysian schools, during reading comprehension lessons, students are asked various questions related to the text read, and this process is known as guided comprehension. Researchers have proven how guided reading comprehension questions are used when teachers are to test students' understanding of a text. In this study, the researcher observed the questioning of the teachers in the reading of short stories during Literature in English for Form Four. The questioning technique was based on Barrett's Taxonomy of reading comprehension. The views by certain writers

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had prompted the researcher further to observe lessons of only short stories as the reading texts for this study. James and Carter (2006) agree to the fact that narrative texts are pervasive in most classrooms and students usually are able to predict the reading pattern of such texts.

Madden (2002) in particular, emphasises how reading short stories may build our impression towards a situation. He explains that when we read a story we enable ourselves to trigger our imagination and feel that we are at that moment present at the place. The most vital rationale for using short stories in the classroom related to the present study is presented by Lee (2007) who proposes that the moral teaching and discussion of events and characters discovered in stories enable students to develop higher-order thinking skills. Vethamani (2008) supports the claim by stating that the language in literary texts lends itself as an excellent means for developing critical thinking skills of students.

Ghosn (2002) also supports the use of short stories by listing a few good reasons for using stories, as part of literature in the classroom. He maintains that (i) stories provide a motivating, meaningful context for the learning of language; (ii) stories are also capable of contributing to language learning as they present natural language in a simplified way and can thus foster vocabulary development in context. Similarly, Garvie (1990) is of the view that story assists in all varieties of the EFL situations for it seems to facilitate and contextualise the items of the syllabus/course providing a field of learning which is meaningful, interesting and motivating. Garvie (1990) also adds that stories prepare ESL learners toward the development of the language which meets the needs of the thought stimulated. Patesan (2004) generally backs up the view by emphasising that comprehension, assimilation and interpretation of literature are steps toward new concepts or ideas as well as towards enhancing one's vocabulary building. The researcher was able to reveal through the findings of this study the types of questions teachers asked during reading comprehension lessons based on Barrett's Taxonomy of reading comprehension.

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The researcher, through the findings was also able to conclude how far teachers had gone in emphasising higher-order thinking skills as required by the English Language syllabus of Malaysian schools.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In Malaysian schools, students are taught reading comprehension to understand the underlying meanings of texts of different genres such as poems, short stories, and novels. It is one way of asking students questions pertaining to the literary text they have just read. Lipman (2003) strengthens the view of questioning in reading when he claimed that questions are formulated to understand the meaning of what is said or read and they may also point out underlying problems. Nevertheless, Liu (2009) argues that in real-life classrooms, not all EFL teachers know how to question successfully. Similarly, Hannel (2009) claims that although questioning is common it is not well understood and this impedes its effective role in the classroom.

The major problem which formed the basis of the present study was that, most of the questions asked by the teachers were usually of the surface level of comprehension and thus students were but engaged in very low level thinking processes. This fact was revealed as early as 1960's by Sanders (1961) who found out that some teachers intuitively ask questions of high quality, but far too many place an extreme emphasis upon questions that require students only to remember and practically no teachers make full sense of all worthwhile kinds of questions. This problem seemed to persist to date for recently, Habsah Hussin (2006) also discovered that the majority of questions set by EFL and science-as-content-taught-in-English classes are low-level and factual, and not designed to encourage critical thinking on the part of the learners. In addition, Bond (2008) also discovered that 95% of teachers' questions are classified as low-level usually requiring a yes or no answer.

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In low-level thinking processes, answers to most of the questions asked can be found in the text itself. Students' thinking therefore is only confined to the lowest stage of thinking which is known as the literal level of understanding. If so is the attitude of the teachers, then it will not be feasible to elevate students' thinking to a higher level through the use of questions. This is because what the government expects is to get students to do the higher-order thinking. The Education Ministry of Malaysia places a high emphasis on thinking skills. It is one of the core requirements in the syllabi of all the subjects to generate individuals with the highest level of literacy and intellectualism. It is stipulated in the Curriculum Specifications for Form 4 that critical and creative thinking skills are incorporated in the learning outcomes to enable learners to analyse information, make decisions, solve problems and express themselves accurately and creatively in the target language (Ministry of Education of Malaysia, 2003).

One of the educational emphases stipulated in the Curriculum Specifications implies how much critical and creative thinking skills are deemed crucial to the ministry. It is clear therefore, that the ministry expects teachers to promote higher-order thinking skills by incorporating them in their lessons. The only way to engage students in higher-level thinking is through questioning. It is proposed by Beyer (1997) who mentions that productive, higher-order student thinking can be initiated and structured in a number of ways. One way is by asking what he terms as 'thoughtful questions'. This view is further supported by Fisher (1995) who claims that a good question is an invitation to think or do. Mustafa Zulkuf Altan (2008) also stresses the importance of enhancing students' higher-order thinking skills by stating that it is crucial because in our rapidly changing society, it is becoming compulsory that individuals are capable of thinking differently and creatively.

Therefore, in order to study how far teachers had gone in emphasising higher-order thinking skills in the classroom, the researcher carried out this study. In this study, the questions teachers asked during reading comprehension lessons were categorised according to the thinking levels in Barrett's Taxonomy.

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It was then that the researcher learned how far teachers had gone in emphasising thinking skills (in general) and higher-order thinking skills (in particular). This study, therefore, was carried out in line with the government's emphasis on thinking skills in education.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of conducting this study was to examine teachers' questioning in the teaching of reading comprehension during the literature period allocated specifically for short stories. Besides that, this study was carried out to categorise the type of questions asked based on Barrett's Taxonomy of reading comprehension, so that the thinking levels of those questions could be easily gauged. Another purpose of conducting this study was to find out how far teachers had promoted or encouraged thinking skills through questions.

1.4 Objectives of the study

Following were the objectives of the study:

1. To classify and categorise the types of questions according to their levels in Barrett's Taxonomy for reading comprehension.
2. To determine the frequencies of lower-order questions versus higher-order questions.

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3. To identify the questioning strategies employed by teachers in reading comprehension lessons.

4. To determine teachers' views on questioning in general.

1.5 Research questions

Following were the research questions formulated for the study:

1. What are the types of questions used by the teachers in reading comprehension lessons?

2. What are the frequencies of lower-order questions versus higher-order questions?

3. What are the questioning strategies employed by the teachers in reading comprehension lessons?

4. What are teachers' views on questioning generally?

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1.6 Conceptual framework of the study

The conceptual framework of the study as shown in Figure 1.1, outlines the elements this study focused on. What we had been seeking in this study was teachers' questioning. Splitter (1995) suggests that good questioning is built on the comprehension of the content and processes of teaching and learning. In addition, there are many ways to categorise questions and practice teacher questioning (Hirsch, 2010). As for the present study, teachers' questioning had been divided into levels of questioning adopted from Barrett's Taxonomy of reading comprehension and questioning strategies which were pre-determined by the researcher, as shown in Figure 1.1. The reason for pre-determining the questioning strategies was; the participants did not understand what was meant by the phrase 'questioning strategies'.

There are five levels in the Barrett's Taxonomy of reading comprehension. As shown in the chart, the levels are *literal comprehension, reorganisation, inferential comprehension, evaluation* and *appreciation*. *Literal comprehension* is a level that concentrates on information explicitly stated in the material (Patesan, 2004). Recognition or recall of a series of facts and ideas in a text are the simplest tasks one can do at this level as it is the lowest level of cognition in the taxonomy. Meanwhile, *reorganisation* according to Helgesen (2009) requires students to organize or order information. *Reorganisation* like *literal comprehension*, is also a lower-order thinking level in Barrett's Taxonomy ranked higher than the latter.

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Furthermore, Vethamani (2007) explains, at the *inferential comprehension* stage students portray their abilities to utilise explicit information from texts and their intuition and experience to make clever hypotheses and guesses. It has to be highlighted that inferential comprehension is a higher-order thinking level at Barrett's Taxonomy. On the other hand, *evaluation* level refers to judging the language and effect of the text in the light of appropriate criteria (Reima Al-Jarf, 2007). It has to be stressed *evaluation* is one of the highest thinking levels in Barrett's Taxonomy, followed by *appreciation*.

The final and the highest-order thinking level in the taxonomy known as *appreciation*, is particularly directed to the advanced students. Patesan (2004) believes that it is appropriate for advanced learners who are aesthetically sensitive to what they are reading. The researcher does not agree with this bias definition of the level which intends to place advanced learners at the peak and neglect the lower proficiency students. *Appreciation*, the highest level of thinking at Barrett's Taxonomy, is defined by Vethamani (2007) as a level which deals with the psychological and aesthetic impacts of the text on students. Vethamani continues that it requires students to use all their cognitive dimensions (the previous levels mentioned above) and expects of them an emotional response to the aesthetic and artistic elements in the texts. However, Vethamani does not underestimate the lower proficiency students by favouring the advanced. It was learned from the present study that even the lower proficiency students may have been able to do the intended thinking if only teachers had been more tolerant and patient toward them and their needs.

As mentioned earlier, another part of teachers' questioning in this study was the questioning strategies teachers employed when asking questions. The predetermined questioning strategies were *probing, clarification, verification, and rephrasing*. Another significant element of questioning strategies known as the *wait-time* was also included as part of the strategies though it was not one of them.

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Wait-time was included because it facilitates students' responses. This view is supported by Price and Nelson (2007) who believe that teachers should provide adequate wait-time for more meaningful and thoughtful student responses. This was the prime reason the researcher thought it substantial to include 'wait-time' as one of the questioning strategies in this study.

Both the levels of questioning and questioning strategies contributed to reading comprehension. This was so because teachers asked students various questions using several questioning strategies, to get students to comprehend the short stories read. Otherwise, the stories students had read during the reading comprehension lessons would have been meaningless to them. In this study, the questions (regardless of their levels) asked using the aforementioned questioning strategies were aimed at student comprehension of the short stories.

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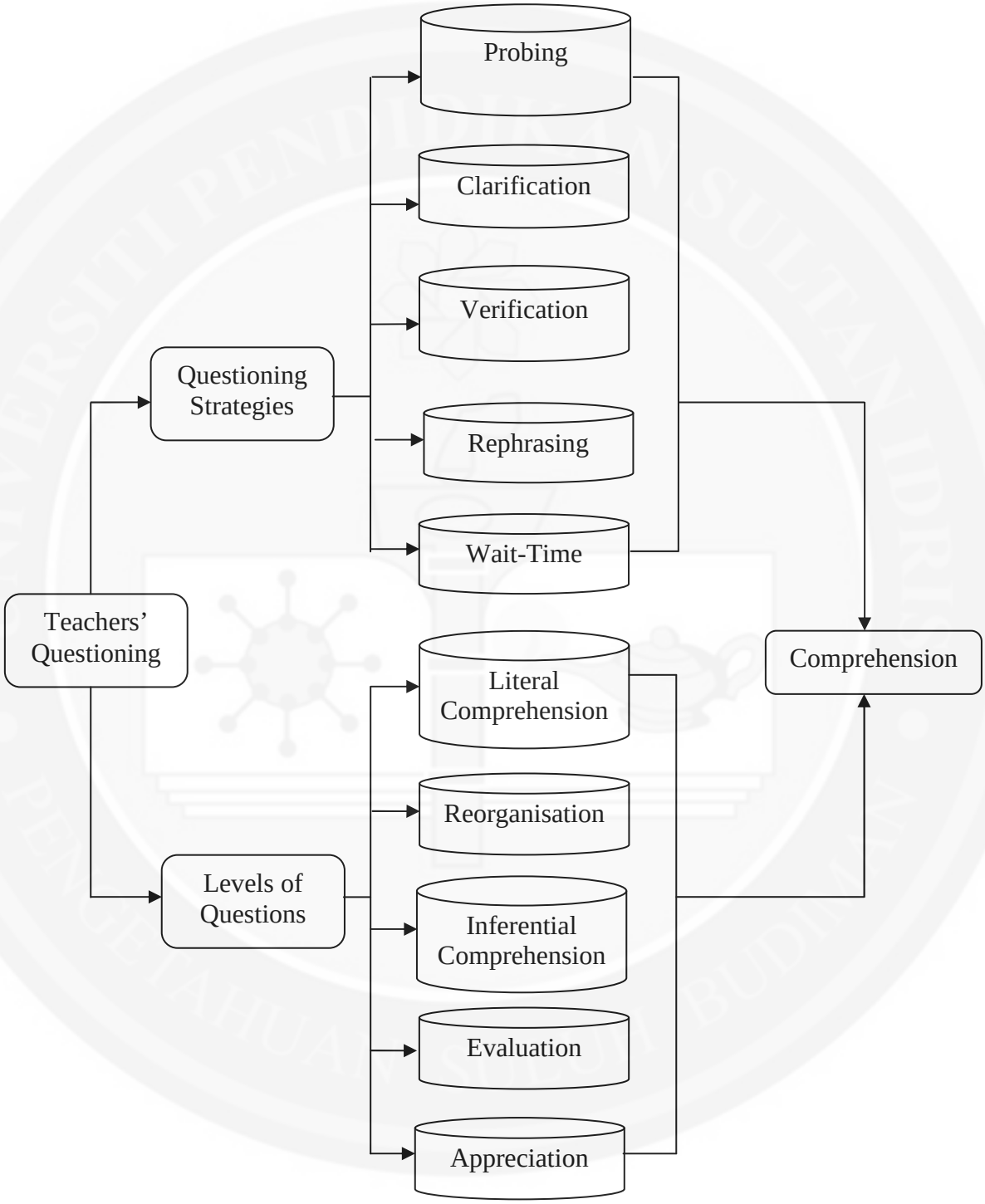
Figure 1.1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



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1.7 Significance of the study

Students will benefit from this study especially because their comprehension and enthusiasm were taken into account where reading of short stories and applying questioning technique were concerned. Students engaged themselves in thinking during the reading of short stories when they were stimulated with questions by their teachers. Besides those parties, there are other substantial figures that will gain advantage from this study as well. Such examples will be the school, parents and the Ministry of Education. The school will be able to produce more students who are able to think out of the box or simply beyond any given text. Through this study, parents will be motivated to buy more storybooks for their children. This is because short stories are the medium used to improve students' proficiency in reading.

1.8 Limitations of the study

The first limitation of the study was the small number of participants who volunteered to participate. Due to an acute shortage in the number of teachers teaching the English subject to students of form four in the particular school, the researcher had to confine this study to only three participants. Also because of time constraints, the researcher could not observe all the six teachers who taught the English subject. This was because at the time of the study, most of them had already completed teaching short stories. Therefore the researcher was left only with three teachers who were still having short story lessons with students.

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Another limitation was one of the participants of the study had to be interviewed a month after the other two participants had been interviewed. The participant was on a long medical leave upon doctor's advice due to some health complications. Consequently, the researcher had to wait for a lengthy period before an interview could be conducted with the participant.

The researcher had no choice but to conduct one of the interviews in the staffroom as the conference room (the only quiet place available) was in use. The environment was not conducive for the teachers were walking in and out of the staffroom and the unbearable amount of noise caused too much distraction during the interview. The data obtained from the interview was not distorted though.

1.9 Definition of terms

1.9.1 Questioning

As defined by Shameem Rafik Galea (1999) questioning is the art of obtaining clarification by the listener or speaker or writer to reach a common understanding of what is being said or communicated based on the frames of knowledge of the questioner. James and Carter (2006) on the other hand define questioning as a stimulus for student talk, engagement and quest for new knowledge.

As for this study, questioning is a way of gauging students' understanding of the stories read and at the same time elevating students' thinking to a higher level. The questions asked were categorised according to the cognitive levels in Barrett's Taxonomy. This taxonomy consists of five stages, namely; literal comprehension, reorganisation, inferential comprehension, evaluation and appreciation (Fatimah Hamid Don & Safiah Osman, 2001).

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