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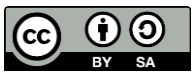

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Investigating Cognitive Levels on Reading Comprehension Questions in EFL Textbook for Merdeka Curriculum

Atina Firdausa Qisthi[1], SettingsDjatmika[2], SettingsNgadiso[3]
Corresponding E-Mail: atinafirdausa@student.uns.ac.id

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the cognitive levels present in "*Bahasa Inggris* Work in Progress *Buku Siswa Untuk SMA/SMK/MA Kelas 10*." It evaluates how they might influence the development of students' thinking skills. The study employed qualitative content analysis, using an analytical framework adapted from the revised Bloom's Taxonomy to analyze 35 WH-questions from six selected chapters. This research primarily employed WH-questions as the primary data source, as they are highly valuable for promoting students' literal comprehension skills, rearranging text information, and developing evaluations, personal responses, and predictions. This research found that higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) were more dominant than lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) in the WH-questions. Furthermore, not all six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy were represented. The cognitive level "Understand" becomes the most dominant in the textbook, followed by "Evaluate," "Analyze," and "Remember," which are the least dominant cognitive levels found in the data. Conversely, the cognitive levels "Apply" and "Create" were not found in the examined data. These results suggest that while the textbook effectively promotes certain aspects of higher-order thinking, it lacks diversity in cognitive challenges. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to supplement the textbook with additional tasks that foster real-world application and creativity. Textbook designers should also integrate a broader range of cognitive levels to provide more comprehensive and balanced learning experiences aligned with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: *EFL textbook, reading comprehension questions, revised Bloom's taxonomy*

Introduction

Reading is considered one of the most important skills in the English Foreign Language (EFL) learning process (Lim et al., 2018; Rianto, 2021). However, students' reading achievement in Indonesian high schools is still considered low (Poedjiastutie, 2018). A survey conducted by the Programmed for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 reported that students in Indonesia scored less than the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in reading, with only 25% attaining Level 2 or higher in reading compared to the OECD average of 74% (OECD, 2023b, 2023a). At this level, students can identify main ideas, find information based on explicit criteria, and reflect on the purpose and form of texts. This indicates that Indonesian students appear to struggle with these fundamental skills. Therefore, improving their reading skills is undeniably essential.

Given the pivotal role of textbooks in supporting reading development in EFL instruction, Indonesia's Ministry of Education (MONEC) mandates that textbooks align with the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the Pancasila Student Profile, including critical thinking and creativity. Textbooks generally cover texts, tasks, and language points for teaching as well as macro-language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and micro-language skills—grammar and vocabulary (Ur, 2024). Furthermore, EFL textbooks should encourage students to develop their thinking skills in the target language through tasks or exercises that involve higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) (Erdiana & Panjaitan, 2023; Margana & Widyantoro, 2017). In other words, EFL textbooks should include particular texts, exercises, and language skills that integrate thinking skills.

The term "cognitive levels" describes the type and degree of thinking skills students need to take part in and finish a task effectively (Anderson et al., 2001). Bloom's taxonomy is a well-known framework for categorizing cognitive levels (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956). Originally, he organized thinking into six levels: knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Later, Bloom's Taxonomy was revised by Anderson & Krathwohl (2001), who made three key changes: replacing 'knowledge' with 'remembering' and 'synthesis' with 'creating' and placing 'evaluating' before 'creating.' Thus, the cognitive domain of Bloom's revised taxonomy includes remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Then, these levels are grouped into the first three levels of the cognitive domain, which are considered lower-order thinking skills, as they simply call for the regular, mechanical application of previously acquired knowledge (Newmann, 1990). In contrast, the last three levels represent higher-order thinking because they require the student to interpret, analyze, or modify information to provide a response to a question or resolve an issue that cannot be resolved by routinely applying previously learned material.

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Understanding these cognitive levels is crucial because their integration in EFL textbooks has a major impact on how well they develop students' thinking skills (Mishan & Timmis, 2015). Students must engage with materials that require them to use their cognitive abilities to build strong thinking skills. There should be a balance between lower-order thinking skills and higher-order thinking skills in reading comprehension questions. The appropriate integration of cognitive levels promotes comprehensive thinking development by facilitating students in developing fundamental thinking abilities and equipping them to handle more challenging analytical and creative thinking (Maley, 2011). Consequently, EFL textbooks should include a variety of cognitive levels that assist students in developing their thinking skills.

Within textbook components, questions directly interact with the students. Comprehension questions are an integral part of reading, as they allow students to interact with the text to create meaning (Day & Park, 2005; Marmolejo-Ramos et al., 2014). Moreover, the form of questions affects the measurement of reading comprehension. The questions should empower students to make predictions, construct and pose questions about the text, write a summary and paraphrase while or after the reading, and draw on their past knowledge and experience (Hussein, 2006).

Among question types, based on the grammatical structure, there are five forms of comprehension questions: yes/no questions, alternative questions, multiple choice questions, true or false, and WH questions (what, when, who, where, why, and how). In teaching and learning, WH questions are highly valuable for promoting students' literal comprehension skills, rearranging text information, and developing evaluations, personal responses, and predictions. This question type is typically used as a follow-up to alternative and yes/no question forms.

Despite the recognized importance of cognitive-level integration, there are substantial gaps in the existing research. Some studies have examined EFL textbooks for previous curricula and different levels of education (Dewayani et al., 2020; Erdiana & Panjaitan, 2023; Sari & Sakhiyya, 2020). Additionally, other research has employed a different framework, the original Bloom's taxonomy (Ariawan et al., 2023). Correspondingly, previous studies reported that EFL textbooks in Indonesia did not integrate cognitive levels effectively.

To address these limitations, the present study examines the cognitive levels of WH-questions in reading comprehension tasks found in the EFL textbook *Buku Bahasa Inggris* Work in Progress *untuk SMA/SMK/MA Kelas 10*, which is designed for the Merdeka Curriculum. Using content analysis, the study adopts revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001) as its analytical framework. The research is guided by the following question: To what extent does the EFL textbook for Kurikulum Merdeka integrate cognitive levels in reading comprehension questions?

Focusing on this framework, the research aims to assess how effectively the textbook promotes LOTS and HOTS, which are valuable for promoting students' thinking skills. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights into the pedagogical quality of EFL textbooks, contributing to the improvement of instructional materials and teaching practices in Indonesian high schools.

Method

This research employed qualitative content analysis to evaluate the cognitive levels of reading comprehension questions in a Merdeka Curriculum EFL textbook for Grade X. Content analysis is a research method of deriving trustworthy and accurate conclusions about the contexts in which texts—or other significant material—are used (Krippendorff, 2004). The goal of this method is to discover themes or categories that emphasize important details and give a summary of the information found during the data collection (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). The rationale for employing qualitative content analysis derives from its ability to methodically examine and assess the integration of lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) in a grade X EFL textbook. Furthermore, it offers numerical data demonstrating the distinctive aspects of the cognitive levels covered in the textbooks. Significantly, this method is an advantageous and feasible choice for this study as it can be carried out at any place and time as long as researchers have access to the text (Schreier, 2012).

This study focuses on the analysis of the EFL textbook for grade X, specifically published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (MONEC). This book has a length of 200 pages. This textbook has 11 texts, including descriptive, procedure, expository, and narrative texts. Furthermore, several significant considerations influenced the selection of this textbook. First, it is widely used in senior high schools since it is a primary textbook issued by the government. Secondly, they are freely accessible to the public. This textbook is available for free download and use on the Sistem Informasi Perbukuan Indonesia website. Additionally, this textbook is designed to follow the Merdeka Curriculum. The description of the textbook is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The description of the EFL textbook

Features	**EFL Textbook**
Title	Bahasa Inggris Work in Progress Buku Siswa Untuk SMA/SMK/MA Kelas 10
Numbers of chapters	6 chapters
Themes	Chapter 1 – Great Athletes
	Chapter 2 – Sports Events
	Chapter 3 – Sports and Health
	Chapter 4 – Healthy Foods

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Chapter 5 – Graffiti	
Chapter 6 – Fractured Stories	

For this study, the researchers purposively selected reading comprehension questions, specifically WH-questions. The texts in this textbook are mostly followed by WH-questions, with a total of 35 questions. Most questions started with WH- stems (i.e., 'what,' 'where,' 'when,' 'who,' 'which,' 'why,' and 'how') and a question mark at the end. While other question types were excluded due to time constraints, WH-questions provided a representative sample of cognitive demands as they naturally span from basic recall to higher-order analysis. The researchers thoroughly read all reading comprehension questions in the textbook and selected only WH-questions for inclusion in the study.

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple validation measures were implemented. Inter-rater reliability was established through independent coding by two senior high school English teachers familiar with the textbook, followed by inter-coder agreement sessions to resolve any discrepancies (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). Triangulation was achieved by analyzing questions across all six chapters and cross-referencing categorizations with prior research.

This study employed Krippendorff's (2004) data collection and analysis components that comprise unitizing, sampling, recording/coding, reducing data, inferring, and narrating. The data collection and analysis were conducted during November 2024. First, reading comprehension questions from an EFL textbook for senior high school tenth grade are utilized to gather verbal text data. Second, the researchers focused exclusively on the reading comprehension questions during the sampling phase. Third, the researchers created codes and a checklist in a table to support data classification and interpretation. After analyzing the reading comprehension questions, the researchers narrowed down the data to identify the prevailing cognitive level. To support data analysis, the researchers employed an analytical framework adapted from the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001) and Xie et al. (2024) to analyze the cognitive levels within the questions in the EFL textbook (see Table 2). Furthermore, the numbers and percentages of LOTS and HOTS integrated into reading comprehension questions in an EFL textbook are statistically presented. Lastly, the findings are interpreted to answer the research question.

Table 2. The Analytical Framework for Analysing the Cognitive Levels of Reading Comprehension Questions in the EFL Textbook

	Cognitive levels	Description	Thinking process in reading comprehension questions
Lower-order thinking skills (LOTS)	Remember (C1)	Retrieve relevant knowledge from long-term memory	• Recognizing and recalling information from prior knowledge or experiences.
	Understand (C2)	Construct meaning from instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication	• Exemplifying the meaning of words, phrases, or structures. • Recognizing the meaning of written, or graphic communication. • Making inferences or predictions based on the information provided.
	Apply (C3)	Carry out or use a procedure in a given situation.	• Using learned material to complete questions. • Using language knowledge to complete texts.
Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS)	Analyze (C4)	Break material into constituent parts and determine how parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.	• Analyzing the theme, content, text type, text organization, language features, or author's point of view of a text. • Distinguishing between facts and inferences or between lexical meanings and contextual meanings. • Discovering similarities and distinctions between individuals, concepts, and language structures.
	Evaluate (C5)	Make judgments based on criteria and standards.	• Using evaluation criteria to make judgments and defend arguments. • Connecting with readers' values, beliefs, or experiences.
	Create (C6)	Put elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganize elements into a new pattern or structure.	• Designing graphic texts, such as posters and mind maps. • Creating oral or written texts, such as plans, speeches, and letters.

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Results

The primary EFL textbook for Grade X of Senior High Schools contains 35 Reading comprehension questions, specifically in WH-questions form, distributed across all six chapters. This even distribution indicates balanced coverage of reading comprehension throughout the textbook. As shown in Figure 1, the cognitive level distribution reveals a near balance between lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), with 17 questions (49%) classified as LOTS and 18 questions (51%) as HOTS.

Table 3 presents the detailed breakdown of cognitive levels across all chapters. The "Understand" (C2) is the most prevalent, accounting for 46% of the

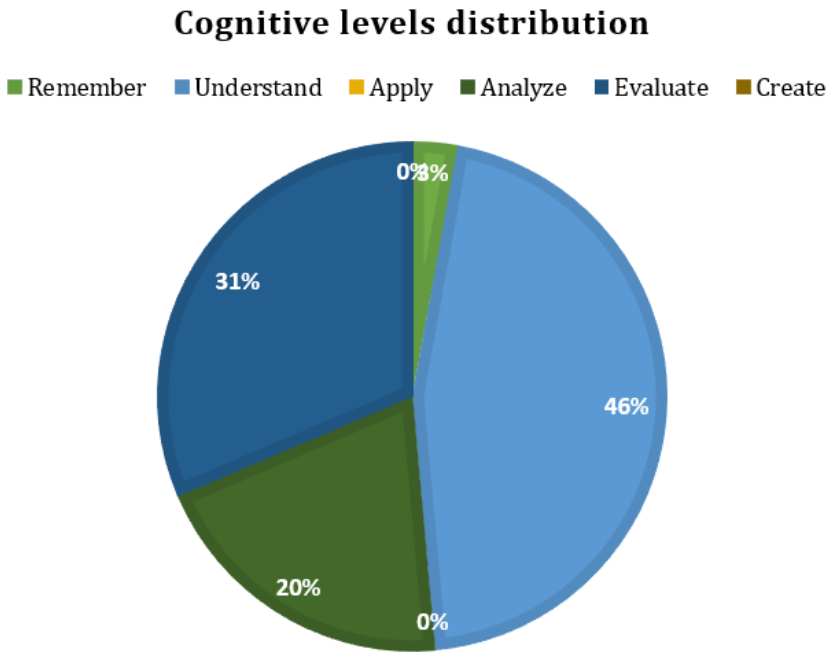

Figure 1. The distribution of cognitive levels

total cognitive levels in the textbook (see Table 2). These findings are followed by "Evaluate" (C5) at 31%, "Analyze" (C4) at 20%, and "Remember" (C1) at 3%. In contrast, the two cognitive levels "Apply" (C3) and "Create" (C6) were not found in the WH-questions of the examined textbook.

Table 3. Distribution of reading comprehension questions

Cognitive levels	Frequencies	Percentage
Remember	1	3%
Understand	16	46%
Apply	0	0%
Analyze	7	20%
Evaluate	11	31%
Create	0	0%
Total	35	100%

The most frequent cognitive level, "Understand," encompasses a variety of thinking processes, such as exemplifying the meaning of words, phrases, or structures, recognizing the meaning of written or graphic communication, and making inferences or predictions based on the information provided. This finding aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on foundational comprehension skills. This level is exemplified by question 14: "'Stop Eating Before You Are Full,' the word 'satiated' in the sentence '...stop eating before you feel completely satiated,' can be best replaced by what word?" This question asked students to find the synonym of the word in the sentence. Similarly, question 1, "What is the main idea of the text?" challenged students to infer the main idea of the text. Moreover, question 29, "What might happen if the woodsman were not there?" asked students to make predictions based on the story. Despite having the same level, those questions involve different thinking processes.

Following the "Understand" cognitive level, the "Evaluate" cognitive level emerges as the next most prevalent, constituting 31% of the total cognitive levels in the analyzed data. The substantial presence of "Evaluate" questions reflects the curriculum's focus on critical thinking. This level encourages students to use evaluation criteria to make judgments, defend arguments, and connect with readers' values, beliefs, or experiences. This level is exemplified by question 25: "In your opinion, what would the world be like without graffiti?" This question asked students to defend their argument towards the statement. Moreover, question 10, "Which of the tips from the mental health infographic that you want to try? Why?" is an example of a question that connects students' beliefs.

The third most common level, "Analyze," involves several thinking processes, such as analyzing the theme, content, text type, text organization, language features, or author's point of view of a text; distinguishing between facts and inferences or between lexical meanings and contextual meanings; and discovering similarities and distinctions between individuals, concepts, and language structures. For

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ISSN 2548-4192 (Online)

instance, question 4, "How does the text organize its idea about Ronaldo?" This question requires students to apply their skills in understanding the organization of the text. Similarly, question 34, "What is meant by 'cat got your tongue? In "Cat got your tongue?" The dwarf said, and pulled out a cat.'" encourages students to distinguish the implied meaning of a sentence. Then, as exemplified by question 20, "Now in group, discuss how do the two expository texts structure their ideas to achieve their goals?" students are asked to discover the differences in how the ideas are structured in the two expository texts.

The least common cognitive level, "Remember," requires students to recognize and recall information from prior knowledge or experiences. This thinking process is reflected in question 13, "In what kind of reading section will you likely find this type of text?" Students were asked to use their knowledge to answer this question.

Then, the "Apply" cognitive level was not found in the data presented. This level involves thinking processes such as using learned material to complete questions and using language knowledge to complete texts. Another cognitive level that was not found in the presented data is "Create." This level includes several thinking processes, such as designing graphic texts, like posters and mind maps, and creating oral or written texts, such as speeches, plans, and letters. Therefore, the complete absence of Apply" and "Create" questions represents a notable gap. While the Merdeka Curriculum encourages practical language use and creative expression, no questions require applying knowledge to new situations (C3) or generating original content (C6). This may reflect the textbook's focus on receptive rather than productive skills in reading sections. This distribution implies that the textbook authors may have allocated different cognitive levels across different language skills rather than incorporating all levels within reading comprehension questions.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of cognitive levels in the reading comprehension questions of the EFL textbook for grade 10, the researchers found that the distribution of lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) in WH-questions was relatively balanced. There are 17 LOTS questions and 18 HOTS questions found in the textbook. These findings align with a prior study, which revealed that the reading comprehension questions in the investigated textbook have various levels, allowing teachers to accommodate the needs of stronger and weaker students (Suyadi & Aisyah, 2023). The balanced mix of basic and advanced thinking skills in the textbook questions appears carefully designed to support the Merdeka Curriculum's focus on both building strong reading fundamentals and developing critical analysis skills.

Importantly, balancing cognitive levels in EFL textbooks helps to keep students motivated and focused (J. Xie et al., 2024). Textbooks that are overly focused on lower cognitive demands may not provide appropriate cognitive stimulation, potentially leading to boredom and disengagement among students. On the other hand, textbooks that are extremely demanding in terms of cognitive problems can overwhelm students, resulting in dissatisfaction and a loss of desire, stifling both learning progress and enjoyment. As a result, a well-designed textbook should strike a careful balance between higher and lower cognitive levels to keep students interested and motivated while promoting effective learning.

Addressing higher cognitive levels in EFL textbooks facilitates the development of essential 21st-century academic and professional skills, including problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, and creative thinking (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). On the other hand, questions integrating LOTS are required to support students in developing strong basic thinking skills to prepare them for more advanced cognitive levels in an EFL textbook. Besides, a range of cognitive levels in an EFL textbook is needed to engage students with different cognitive abilities (Maley, 2011). This variation accommodates each student's cognitive level and improves their cognitive experience. However, the integrated cognitive levels in the examined data were not diverse. This research found that “Understand” and “Evaluate” questions dominated the data, while the questions with cognitive levels “Apply” and “Create” were not found in the data.

These findings corroborated the findings of the study by Shuyi & Renandya (2019). This study analyzed the LOTS and HOTS in English textbooks for the secondary level. They reported that the Normal Technical textbook has an almost equal mix of “Understand” and “Evaluate” questions. The balanced mix of "Understand" and "Evaluate" indicates that a lower cognitive level is required for in-depth understanding before students are exposed to higher-order thinking processes. Thus, the dominance of lower-order thinking skills, “Understand,” shows that textbook publishers consider the proper distribution of lower- and higher-order questions to enhance student’s learning process.

Several previous studies have highlighted that EFL textbooks for Indonesian high schools did not properly distribute cognitive levels. A study by Ariawan et al. (2023) which examined an EFL textbook for grade 10th reported that the textbook only integrates four cognitive levels, with “Knowledge” being the most prevalent, followed by “Comprehension” and “Application.” While the HOTS only involves the “Analysis” level. Additionally, prior studies reported that the cognitive level “Apply” did not exist on the reading tasks (Erdiana & Panjaitan, 2023; Sari & Sakhiyya, 2020).

The absence of "Apply" in the findings may stem from the fundamental nature of WH-questions in reading comprehension. Unlike problem-solving tasks that require applying strategies to new situations, WH-questions primarily assess text understanding through direct inquiry ("what," "where," "when," etc.). For instance,

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while the EFL textbook in China demonstrates application by having students use learned strategies on new texts (S. Xie, 2024), WH-questions typically target literal comprehension or analysis of the given text rather than strategy transfer. This suggests that the missing "Apply" questions reflect a limitation of the WH-question for measuring application skills.

The omission is significant, as the "Apply" level plays a crucial role in enabling students to optimize their reading techniques, improve their reading efficiency, and practice their application-based thinking skills (J. Xie et al., 2024). Additionally, this level develops students' ability to apply what they have learned in any circumstance by allowing them to use their language skills in a new manner. Consequently, incorporating the "Apply" level into reading comprehension questions is vital to assess and cultivate students' abilities to apply their knowledge in diverse and practical situations. To address this gap, teachers could extend existing comprehension questions with application-oriented tasks—for example, after answering a WH-question about a text's content, students might be asked to demonstrate how they would apply the same reading strategies to a different text type or real-world scenario.

In conclusion, integrating diverse cognitive levels in an EFL textbook is essential for promoting the development of students' language and thinking skills. An effective textbook should cater to students' various cognitive abilities. Further, balanced cognitive levels in comprehension questions keep students motivated and engaged. By incorporating a broad range of cognitive levels, an EFL textbook can create a learning environment that is both challenging and supportive, allowing students to thrive in both linguistic and cognitive domains. Therefore, future textbook editions should systematically map cognitive levels across all language skills, include applied learning tasks, and support teachers in implementing higher-order questioning techniques—aligning fully with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on cultivating critical and creative abilities.

Conclusion

This research analyzed the integration of cognitive levels of reading comprehension questions, specifically WH-questions, in an Indonesian senior high school EFL textbook for grade 10th for the Merdeka Curriculum. The research found that the inclusion of LOTS and HOTS was relatively balanced. Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) questions were more prevalent than lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) questions—18 questions (49%) were identified as HOTS, and 17 questions (51%) were classified as LOTS. Furthermore, the cognitive level "Understands" became the most prevalent cognitive level at 46%. It also identified that 31% of the examined questions were "Evaluate." These findings were followed by "Analyze" (20%) and "Remember" (3%). These findings indicate that the textbook balanced LOTS and HOTS to keep students interested and motivated while promoting effective learning.

Despite the balanced LOTS and HOTS, the cognitive levels in the analyzed data were found to be remarkably less varied. For instance, the cognitive levels "Apply" and "Create" did not exist. Thus, teachers and textbook designers need to ensure the inclusion of diverse cognitive levels in EFL textbooks. This variety enriches every student's cognitive experience and considers their cognitive ability.

These findings have important implications for teachers and textbook designers. Textbook designers are in charge of developing EFL textbooks that are interesting and cognitively engaging. Through the thoughtful integration of suitable and challenging cognitive levels, they ensure that these textbooks provide students with adequate opportunities to develop their thinking skills, particularly higher-order thinking skills. Likewise, EFL teachers are responsible for identifying and utilizing the cognitive levels found in EFL textbooks. Their responsibility entails enabling the proper implementation of various cognitive levels within the classroom. As a result, they help to achieve the objectives of EFL textbooks, which are to stimulate the development of students' thinking skills.

However, this research has certain limitations. It focused exclusively on WH reading comprehension questions from an EFL textbook for grade 10th, which could hinder the generalization of the findings to a broader setting. To address this limitation, future studies should broaden their focus to encompass a broader range of language skills, such as listening, speaking, and writing, as well as textbooks from various educational levels. Furthermore, the study did not look into how the textbook was used in the classroom, which could provide useful insights into how the textbook's cognitive levels are addressed in real-world teaching situations. Thus, future studies can examine how cognitive levels in EFL textbooks are used in actual classroom settings. This, in turn, will impact the development of more cognitively stimulating and engaging EFL textbooks for the Merdeka Curriculum.

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