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Development of historical thinking in the first year of high school: analysis of the activities in the History textbook

Desarrollo del pensamiento histórico en el primero de bachillerato: análisis de las actividades del libro de texto de Historia

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(Received on: 21/02/2025; Accepted on: 25/04/2025; Final Version received on: 20/07/2025)

Suggested citation: Nasimba-Mera, E. & Fraga-Luque, O. (2025). Development of historical thinking in the first year of high school: analysis of the activities of the History textbook. *Revista Cátedra*, 8(2), 137-152.

Abstract

The limited development of historical thinking among students represents a central problem in the teaching of history, as it restricts their ability to critically interpret the past and move beyond the mere accumulation of information. Given this situation, the present study aims to analyze the extent to which the activities in the first-year high school history textbook contribute to the development of historical thinking among students. To this end, the 121 activities in the textbook were examined according to the type of historical concept, cognitive demand, and type of activity. A mixed approach and content analysis technique were used, employing a code book and analysis sheet as instruments. The information was



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processed using frequency tables, contingency tables, and a word cloud, with the SPSS and MAXQDA programs. The results highlight that activities related to first-order concepts and with low and intermediate cognitive demands predominate, which highlights the need to diversify the activities in textbooks, incorporating approaches that encourage critical analysis, interpretation, and the reflective use of historical knowledge.

Keywords

Didactics, history, textbooks, first year of high school, historical thought.

Resumen

El escaso desarrollo del pensamiento histórico en el estudiantado representa una problemática central en la enseñanza de la Historia, dado que restringe su capacidad para interpretar críticamente el pasado y superar la mera acumulación de información. Ante esta situación, el presente estudio tiene por objetivo analizar en qué medida contribuyen las actividades del libro de texto de Historia del primer año de Bachillerato al desarrollo del pensamiento histórico en el estudiantado. Para ello, se examinaron las 121 actividades de dicho manual de acuerdo con el tipo de concepto histórico, exigencia cognitiva y tipo de actividad. Se empleó un enfoque mixto y la técnica de análisis de contenido, utilizando como instrumentos un libro de códigos y una ficha de análisis. El tratamiento de la información, que incluyó el uso de tablas de frecuencias, tablas de contingencia y una nube de palabras, se realizó con los programas SPSS y MAXQDA. De los resultados se destaca que predominan actividades relacionadas con conceptos de primer orden y con una exigencia cognitiva baja e intermedia, lo que pone de manifiesto la necesidad de diversificar las actividades en los libros de texto, incorporando enfoques que fomenten el análisis crítico, la interpretación y el uso reflexivo del conocimiento histórico.

Palabras clave

Didáctica, historia, libros de texto, primero de bachillerato, pensamiento histórico.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the development of historical thinking has become established as a primary goal of history teaching and learning. This approach allows us to move from models focused on the mere transmission of content to pedagogical models focused on reflection, criticism, and construction (Ibagón and Minte, 2022, p. 121). In this way, students are given an active and leading role in the discipline of history, in line with the demands of the 21st century.

Leading researchers in history teaching, such as Domínguez and Santisteban, agree that the teaching and learning of history should not be limited to the transmission and repetition of facts, dates, and figures, but should focus on the development of historical thinking (Domínguez, 2015, p. 8; and Santisteban, 2010, p. 35). This allows students to acquire the skills and abilities essential for actively and independently constructing knowledge, considering that history is not a finished fact but a construction that is constantly being revised and interpreted.

Therefore, with the aim of contributing to the development of historical thinking in high school students, this study analyzes one of the most widely used teaching materials in the teaching and learning of history: the textbook. According to Saíz and Colomer, this resource,



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“like other resources used in the subject of history, should aim to promote adequate historical education” (p. 3); that is, to encourage the development of historical thinking.

“Textbooks have traditionally been one of the central resources in education systems, especially in Ecuador” (Sánchez, 2021, p. 41). Their relevance lies not only in the historical narrative they contain, but also in the activities that guide the teaching and learning process. Hence, their analysis provides insight into how the teaching and learning of history is structured in the classroom.

Previous studies in Spain have revealed that the activities in secondary school textbooks present challenges for the development of historical thinking. Research carried out by Ferreras et al., Gómez et al., and Simón shows a predominance of activities focused on memorizing factual content, to the detriment of those that foster historical thinking (Ferreras et al., 2020, p. 171; Gómez et al., 2020, p. 1; and Simón, 2023, p. 1). This situation highlights the need to balance the use of first- and second-order concepts to strengthen this competence in high school.

In this context, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: to what extent do the activities proposed in the history textbook for the first year of high school in Ecuador contribute to the development of historical thinking? This question is justified by the need to critically analyze the textbook, one of the most widely used teaching materials in the teaching and learning of history. This resource plays a key role in pedagogical mediation and in the formation of specific cognitive skills, such as the aforementioned capacity for historical thinking.

In terms of the organization of the article, the second section presents the theoretical foundations of historical thinking. The third describes the methodology used for the analysis of the activities, while the fourth presents the main findings. Finally, the fifth section discusses the results and conclusions. The purpose is to contribute to the reflection on the teaching and learning of history and to highlight the need to design teaching strategies that effectively promote the development of historical thinking in the classroom.

2. Theoretical reference

Historical thinking has been extensively studied by various authors. Among them, Wineburg (2001) defines it as a “set of skills specific to historical work that enable students to construct knowledge autonomously” (n.p.). This type of thinking encompasses various cognitive skills that enable students to interpret, understand, and reflect on the past.

This type of thinking “is not intuitive and natural knowledge, but requires a gradual learning process” (Saíz and López, 2015, p. 89). Therefore, certain elements must be considered during the teaching and learning process of history in order to develop it. First, Domínguez (2015) points out that “it is necessary to work with first-order or substantive concepts and second-order or methodological concepts” (p. 46); the latter are the ones that should predominate in the formation of historical thinking.

First-order concepts are those related to specific dates, figures, and events, with a more conceptual nature. For example, knowing the date of the Battle of Pichincha or who the main figures of the Liberal Revolution were. These are classified as:

- Chronological: Knowledge of the dates on which a particular event occurred or their order.



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- Factual: Knowledge of specific concepts, theories, or facts from the past (Gómez and Miralles, 2015, p. 59)

On the other hand, second-order or methodological concepts are those that are more strategic and focus on understanding history. Within the second-order concepts, Seixas and Morton (2013) present six key concepts:

Historical relevance: Ability to establish the relevance of specific events or individuals based on one's own criteria. Historical sources: Critical analysis of primary and secondary sources for subsequent interpretation. Change and continuity: Identification of continuities and changes over time. Causes and consequences: Evaluating the multiple causes and consequences of historical events. Historical perspective: Understanding the perspectives of people in the past based on historical context. Ethical dimension: Generating ethical judgments and assessments of past actions based on context (p. 4).

First-order and second-order concepts complement each other and are interdependent. However, in order to learn to think historically, it is crucial to place greater emphasis on second-order concepts, as these enable us to understand and make sense of first-order concepts. Thus, it is essential to teach not only 'knowing' (content), but also 'doing' (applying), using second-order concepts, which require a higher level of cognitive complexity (Moreno et al., 2023, p. 91).

According to Martínez et al., historical thinking requires more complex skills than simple memorization and repetition of content (Martínez et al., 2022, p. 1), which implies a higher level of cognitive processing. Marzano and Kendall's taxonomy (2007) structures the cognitive system into four levels: "retrieval, comprehension, analysis, and application" (p. 13). In this sense, to foster historical thinking, it is necessary to transcend the level of retrieval and propose activities that promote comprehension, analysis, and application of historical knowledge.

For the development of historical thinking, it is essential to propose activities that give students an active role, in line with a constructivist pedagogical model. The focus should be on strategies based on research, inquiry, and problem solving, as these favor the development of complex cognitive skills and, consequently, the construction of historical thinking (VanSledright, 2011, n/p). In contrast, mechanical activities and short-answer questions distance themselves from this approach by limiting analysis and critical reflection on historical events.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection technique and instruments

This study uses a mixed-methods approach and uses content analysis as its primary technique, which allows for the interpretation of documentary sources through the application of both quantitative and qualitative procedures (Guix, 2008, p. 27). To collect and analyze the activities proposed in the first-year high school history textbook, two Excel-based instruments were designed: a codebook and an analysis sheet.

For the analysis process, activities were specifically selected from the first-year high school textbook, issued by the Ministry of Education in 2020 and published digitally and free of



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charge on the "Recursos Educativos 2" website. A total of 121 activities were analyzed, distributed across the six units comprising the textbook. Data collection was carried out using an analysis sheet (Table 1), in which the 121 activities were recorded, along with the unit to which they belong, the name of the unit, the thematic content, and the page on which they are located. In addition, three additional columns were included to classify each activity according to the type of historical concept, the level of cognitive demand and the type of activity.

Unit of analysis	Unit of analysis			Categorías			
Activities	Nº Unit	Unit Name	Thematic content	Página	Type of historical concept	Cognitive demand	Type of activity
Activity 1							
Activity 2							
Activity...							

Table 1. Analysis Sheet

In addition to the analysis sheet, a codebook was designed based on criteria previously defined in studies on historical thought. This instrument allowed us to define each category and subcategory for the classification of the 121 activities according to the type of historical concept, cognitive demand, and type of activity. To define the type of historical concept (Table 2), the studies by Gómez and Miralles (2015) and Seixas and Morton (2013) were considered. The cognitive demand (Table 3) was defined based on the taxonomy of Marzano and Kendall (2007), while the classification of the type of activities (Table 4) was based on the work of Gómez et al. (2019).

Types of Historical Concepts		Example
Conceptos de primer orden	<i>Chronological Knowledge</i> Knowledge of the dates on which a particular event occurred or their order.	What event occurred in the year 1492?
	<i>Factual Knowledge</i> Knowledge of concepts, theories, or events from the past.	What are the differences between history and historiography?
	<i>Historical relevance</i> Establishes the importance of certain events or figures.	Explain the importance of Moses to Israel.
Conceptos de segundo orden	<i>Historical Sources</i> Examine historical sources (primary or secondary) for further interpretation..	Examine the Greek sculpture below and detail what information it provides.
	<i>Change and Continuity</i> Recognizes those aspects that change over time and those that remain constant.	How does ancient Roman law differ from the current Ecuadorian legal system?
	<i>Causes and Consequences</i>	Outline the causes and consequences of the Jewish diasporas.



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<i>Analyzes the multiple causes and repercussions of a historical phenomenon or event.</i>	
<i>Historical perspective</i>	Imagine you are a citizen of Athens and you are writing a letter to your sister who lives in another city. In your letter, explain your situation as a citizen in Athens.
Determines the perspective of people in the past according to the historical context. Understands the attitudes and actions of the past.	
<i>Ethical dimension</i>	Do you agree with the establishment of castes in Ancient India? Justify your answer.
Generates ethical judgments and evaluations of past actions based on context. Evaluates crimes, injustices, benefits.	

Table 2. Types of Historical Concepts. Adapted from: Gómez and Miralles (2015) and Seixas and Morton (2013)

Cognitive Demand	Examples
<i>Remediation</i> To complete the activity, students must recognize or recall the knowledge in the same way it is presented in the text. Verbs such as select, identify, determine, name, describe, locate, list are often used; or questions such as: What? Who? Where? When?	What physical changes did hominids undergo?
<i>Comprehension</i> To complete the activity, students are required to integrate or symbolize the acquired knowledge. Actions such as describe how or why, describe the effects of, describe the relationship between, explain how, make connections between, represent, draw are often used. At this level, work tends to be done on developing graphic organizers or interpreting tables, images, or maps.	Draw a comparison chart between the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods.
<i>Analysis</i> To complete the activity, students are required to identify similarities or differences, classify knowledge into categories, analyze errors, make generalizations, or develop specifications, which implies generating new knowledge that they did not previously possess. Verbs such as differentiate, identify problems, identify drawbacks, judge, and evaluate are often used. concludes, infers, deduces, defends, predicts.	Discuss the differences between the original, romantic, and current meanings of the term culture.
<i>Aplication</i> To complete the activity, students are required to identify similarities or differences, classify knowledge into categories, analyze errors, make generalizations, or develop specifications, which implies generating new knowledge that they did not previously possess. Verbs such as differentiate, identify problems, identify drawbacks, judge, and evaluate are often used. concludes, infers, deduces, defends, predicts.	Research and write a micro-essay on the origin of Israel.

Table 3. Levels of cognitive demand. Adapted from: (Marzano and Kendall, 2007)



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Type of activity	Example
<i>Short Question</i> Students are asked to answer short questions based on the textbook. <i>Objective Test</i> Students are asked to: fill in the blanks, order events, choose the correct option, match columns, or complete statements. <i>Text Commentary</i> Students are asked to analyze texts presented in the textbook. This includes identifying main ideas, opinions, syntheses, and interpretations. <i>With Images and Figures</i> The activity involves the use of images and/or figures found in the textbook <i>With Maps</i> The activity involves the use of maps provided in the textbook. <i>Graphic Organizers</i> Students must create diagrams, mind maps, concept maps, or comparison charts. <i>Creation</i> Students must produce something new, fostering creativity and innovation. This includes creating poems, journals, and songs. <i>Information Search</i> This involves students gathering information from different media (beyond the textbook) <i>Collaborative</i> It involves not only intellectual exercises but also teamwork. It includes debates, roundtable discussions, and role-playing.	What does the term culture mean? Relate each event to the historical period. What message does Gombrich's text want to convey? Observe the drawing of Mesopotamian civilization and answer: What advantages can be gained by being located near a river? Look at the map and answer: Which territories were conquered by Alexander the Great? Draw a comparative table of historiographical currents. Imagine you are a citizen of Ancient Athens. Write a letter to a family member telling them the most interesting aspects of the polis. Research the events that occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Were there further military interventions by the United States? Hold a debate based on the following question: What is culture? Who can be considered a cultured person?

Table 4. Type of activities. Adapted from: (Gómez et al., 2019)

3.2 Data analysis

For data analysis, SPSS and MAXQDA were used, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. First, a descriptive statistical analysis was performed in SPSS for each category: historical concepts, levels of cognitive demand, and types of activities. Frequency and percentage tables were generated, as well as contingency tables between categories.

Subsequently, the textual content of the 121 textbook activities was imported into MAXQDA to identify patterns and trends in their formulation. A word cloud was generated to visualize the most frequently used terms and analyze their relationship to the development of historical thought.



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4 Results

Regarding the type of historical concept, a predominance of first-order concepts was found over second-order concepts, as shown in Table 5. The majority of activities (58.7%) focused on factual knowledge, that is, specific information about historical concepts, theories, figures, or events. This is evident in questions such as: What Germanic kingdoms existed at the end of the 5th century? Where was the term culture first used? These questions can be quickly and explicitly answered in the textbook.

In contrast, second-order concepts, fundamental to the development of historical thought, are found in a lower percentage, with a total of 38.9%. Within this category, causes and consequences are the most common, at 11.6%; while ethical dimension, change and continuity, and historical sources register percentages lower than 6%. Which shows a scarce presence of activities in which students generate ethical judgments, recognize the aspects that are transformed and maintained over time, and make use of historical sources for their respective interpretation.

Type of historical concepts		Frequency	Percentage
First-order concepts	Factual Knowledge	71	58.7
	Chronological Knowledge	3	2.5
Second-order concepts	Historical Relevance	10	8.3
	Historical Sources	6	5.0
	Change and Continuity	5	4.1
	Causes and Consequences	14	11.6
	Historical Perspective	7	5.8
	Ethical Dimension	5	4.1
	Total	121	100.0

Table 5. Frequencies and percentages of the type of historical concept

Regarding cognitive demands, the most common cognitive demand was comprehension (45.5%), followed by retrieval (27.3%), and analysis (25.6%), as detailed in Table 6. This shows that most activities focus on the first three levels of Marzano and Kendall's (2007) taxonomy, prioritizing recognition, recall, integration, symbolization, classification, association, generalization, and specification of historical knowledge.

However, a limited presence of activities was also observed at the application level, which is key to fostering skills such as problem-solving, researching diverse sources, decision-making, and experimentation. Of the 121 activities analyzed, only two fall within this level, highlighting the need to incorporate teaching approaches that promote more active and meaningful learning.

Cognitive Demand	Frequency	Percentage
Recovery	33	27.3
Comprehension	55	45.5
Analysis	31	25.6
Application	2	1.7
Total	121	100.0

Table 6. Frequencies and percentages of the level of cognitive demand



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Regarding the type of activities, short questions are the most frequent, accounting for 62%. Examples of these questions include: What is work? What was the economic basis of the Mesopotamian empires? Activities with graphic organizers are a considerable distance behind (13.2%). The remaining activities, related to images and figures, text commentary, collaborative activities, maps, and objective tests, account for less than 10%. This highlights the need to propose a greater diversity of activities that allow students to take an active role in constructing historical knowledge.

It is important to note that, of the 121 activities analyzed, only one creative activity and two information-searching activities were found, reflecting the limited presence of activities that encourage students to produce something new and research diverse sources that involve going beyond the textbook. Table 7 details the data obtained.

Type of activity	Frequency	Percentage
Short Question	75	62.0
Objective Test	3	2.5
Text Commentary	7	5.8
With Images and Figures	9	7.4
With Maps	4	3.3
Graphic Organizers	16	13.2
Creation	1	0.8
Information Search	2	1.7
Collaborative	4	3.3
Total	121	100.0

Table 7. Frequencies and percentages of the type of activity

The analysis of the relationship between the type of historical concept and cognitive demand, based on the Chi-square test (Table 8) shows a highly significant association. First-order concepts (chronological and factual) are related to the first two levels of cognitive demand: recovery and comprehension, while second-order concepts have a greater relationship with the level of comprehension and analysis (Table 9). Evidence that working with second-order concepts, fundamental for the development of historical thinking, also implies greater cognitive demands, as pointed out by Martínez and Gómez (2018).

	Value	Gl	Asymptotic significance (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-square	56.268a	21	<.001
Likelihood ratio	61.052	21	<.001
N of valid cases	121		

Table 8. Chi Square test between type of historical concept and cognitive demand



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Type of historical concept		Cognitive demand				Total
		Recovery	Comprehension	Analysis	Application	
Type of historical concept	Factual Knowledge	30	28	11	2	71
	Chronological Knowledge	2	1	0	0	3
	Historical Relevance	0	7	3	0	10
	Historical Sources	0	3	3	0	6
	Change and Continuity	0	1	4	0	5
	Causes and Consequences	1	12	1	0	14
	Ethical Dimension	0	0	5	0	5
	Historical Perspective	0	3	4	0	7
	Total	33	55	31	2	121

Table 9. Contingency table between historical concept and cognitive requirement

The analysis of the relationship between concept type and activity type, based on the Chi-square test (Table 10), also reveals a highly significant association between both categories. The majority of short-question activities are linked to first-order knowledge, while the remaining activity types are distributed to a lesser extent among the different types of historical concepts, as seen in Table 11.

It is noteworthy that text commentary activities and image and figure activities are related to historical sources (second-order concepts). These types of activities could be used as a starting point to encourage the use of primary and secondary sources for the construction of historical knowledge. These findings in themselves reveal the need to diversify activities to foster historical thinking, rather than relying solely on short questions.

	Value	G1	Asymptotic significance (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-square	98.199 ^a	56	<.001
Likelihood ratio	66.166	56	.166
N of valid cases	121		

Table 10. Chi Square test between type of historical concept and type of activity



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		Type of activity									Total
		Short question	Objective Test	Text comment	With images and figures	With maps	Graphic organizers	Creation	Search for information	Collaborative	
Type of historical concept	Factual knowledge	47	1	2	3	4	9	0	2	3	71
	Chronological knowledge	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
	Historical relevance	6	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	10
	Historical sources	0	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	6
	Change and continuity	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
	Causes and consequences	11	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	14
	Historical perspective	3	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	7
	Ethical dimension	3	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
	Total	75	3	7	9	4	16	1	2	4	121

Table 11. Contingency table between historical concept and cognitive requirement

Finally, after generating the word cloud in MaxQda, it was evident that the most frequent terms are closely related to specific historical facts, such as the names of empires, figures, and events, reflecting a focus on factual knowledge, as shown in Figure 1.

The most frequent word is "what?", followed by words such as "answers," "comparative," "elaborates," "relationship," "believe," "observes," and "explains." This reveals a predominance of factual knowledge, but also highlights the presence of activities that encourage an active role for students in learning, through observation, reflection, comparison, and explanation. There are activities that promote the development of historical thinking, although to a lesser extent.



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Figure 1. Word cloud of textbook activities

It is also important to note that the most frequently used words in the activities are: "culture," "Roman," "Greek," "empire," "Sparta," "Athens," "civilizations," "women," "Neolithic," and "hominids," which reveal an emphasis on topics related to ancient civilizations, especially Greece and Rome. This approach suggests the need for a more appropriate balance in the selection of activities for each of the topics covered in the textbook.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained show a clear prevalence of first-order concepts over second-order concepts in the activities analyzed. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted in other contexts, such as Spain, where a similar trend has been identified in history textbooks (Simón, 2023, p. 1). The activities present a predominantly factual and conceptual focus, rather than a critical understanding and interpretation of history. This coincidence with international research reinforces the need to rethink the design of activities, incorporating second-order concepts more frequently.

Of the six second-order concepts, the concept of ethical dimension, along with the concepts of change and continuity and historical perspective, are among the least present in the activities analyzed. As evidenced in the Spanish textbooks, "the concepts of historical relevance and historical consciousness or the ethical dimension of history have a lesser presence" (Martínez and Gómez, 2018, p. 160). For this reason, it is imperative to rethink the balanced inclusion of first- and second-order concepts in History textbook activities to foster the development of historical thinking.

The cognitive demands of the activities proposed in the History textbook focus primarily on the first three levels of Marzano and Kendall's (2007) taxonomy. Consequently, it is important to design educational activities that mobilize complex cognitive capacities and thinking skills specific to the historical discipline (Gómez, 2014, p. 14), thus allowing us to



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transcend the mere repetition and memorization of content. Students must be able to research, make decisions, solve problems, and argue to actively construct their knowledge.

There are few activities that invite students to produce something new, research diverse sources, or work collaboratively, which reinforces the need to incorporate these types of proposals more frequently in textbooks. In line with these findings, it is important to note that, according to Carretero and Gartner, fostering the development of historical thinking requires creating spaces for dialogue, debate, and discussion, in which students can question assumptions, evaluate sources, and recognize the complexity of historical events (Carretero and Gartner, 2024, p. 84).

There is a significant association between the type of historical concept and cognitive demand. Second-order concepts allow students to develop and integrate complex skills (Martínez and Gómez, 2018, p. 149). Therefore, by working with the six second-order concepts—historical relevance, historical sources, change and continuity, causes and consequences, historical perspective, and ethical dimension—it is also possible to foster complex cognitive skills in which students take on a leading role.

Thus, it is concluded that the activities proposed in the first-year high school history textbook in Ecuador offer limited contributions to the development of historical thinking. This highlights the need to review and enrich the didactic design of these materials, incorporating proposals that promote more active, reflective, and contextualized learning, in line with current approaches to the teaching and learning of history.

To foster the development of historical thinking in high school students, it is necessary to design activities that address first- and second-order concepts in a balanced manner, with special emphasis on the latter. These activities should pose diverse cognitive demands, transcending the remedial level to promote comprehension, analysis, and application. Likewise, it is crucial to propose a variety of activity types that give students an active role in the teaching and learning of history at this level of education.

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