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SOFITEL BRISBANE GRAND CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

THE ASSESSMENT OF ORAL ENGLISH IN ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICA: EMERGING ISSUES

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Abstract

The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) conducts tests in Oral English as part of its assessment of candidates in English Language at the Senior Secondary School Level. The test presumes a level of uniformity in the way the language is spoken and this forms the basis for the adoption of some standards in assessing the level of proficiency in spoken English among examinees.

Language proficiency has an academic and socio-cultural context resulting in variations in intonations, meanings and expressions given to spoken words.

The paper examines the impact of regional factors on the way the English Language is spoken in Anglophone West Africa as well as how these factors impact on the set benchmarks for assessing proficiency in WAEC Oral English test.

The paper further explores other emerging issues that have invariably affected the nature and mode of assessment of English Language Proficiency (ELP) in WAEC Oral English test and what lessons they offer for Assessment Agencies.

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THE ASSESSMENT OF ORAL ENGLISH IN ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICA: EMERGING ISUES

1. ## INTRODUCTION

English Language is an acquired second language in Anglophone West Africa. It is also the language of trade, education and administration.
English Language is also the language of instruction in the school system and a Core Subject of study in the education curricula of all five member countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone and The Gambia) of **the West African Examinations Council (WAEC).**

In the final exit examination for Senior Secondary Schools, candidates are expected to take the English Language test along with other subjects. The test of the oral mode of English has been an issue of some controversy among examining bodies. In the early 60's when the SC/GCE Ordinary Level examination was the final exit examination being conducted by **the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate.** The oral test was optional and a candidate's performance in it was not considered a component of the English Language paper. The object of the paper at that time was to test the candidate's ability to speak and understand English.

In the early 70s, performance in the Oral English test was made part of the overall assessment of the candidates in English Language. The move was meant to compel teachers to teach the spoken aspect of the Language which hitherto had been overlooked.

Grieve (1984) in his report stated as follows:

> "*No examination in English Language which does not include Oral as an integral part of the examination can be regarded as " adequate"*

Deen (1996) stated that the introduction of Oral English as a compulsory paper was received by stakeholders in education with mixed feelings because there was and still no uniformity in the way the English Language is spoken.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON SPEECH DEVELOPMENT.

We live in the world principally as presented to us by language. **Sapir (1929)** stated that language is the raw material by which a people's outlook on the world is fashioned. He wrote:

> *"... The real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices ...on us"*

These choices include our speech habits such as intonation, pronunciation and interpretation of words. Our speech habits are acquired very early in childhood along our mother tongue. As people grow, they tend to integrate into their society by acquiring the models of speech adopted by members of the society to which they belong. Such regional/group differences become affectionately regarded as part of the personality of members of the group. This is what is commonly referred to as '**linguistic pride'**.

The regional variations in the way the English Language is spoken is a reflection of the variations that exist in the speech patterns in different regional groups. Even among the native speakers of the language, there are sub-variations that have given rise to remarkably different patterns of the spoken form to be found among Scottish, Welsh , Midland and London speakers.

There is a wide variation in the way the English Language is spoken in Anglophone West Africa. **Afolabi (1997)** observed that even among the educated elites in the West African Sub-region, English Language is spoken using the sound systems of their mother tongues.. He quoted **Gimson (1991)** as saying

> *"in these regions, the interference of the indigenous phonological structures is such that the efficacy of spoken English as a means of communication tend to fall to a low level within quite restricted areas, for reasons which are primarily phonetic"*

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Afolabi (*ibid*) further observed that there are serious deficiencies of a mainly phonological kind which becomes apparent when one listens to a small group of people discussing in English. He cited examples among the Nigerians, Ghanaians and Liberians and that it is possible to tell apart the nationality of the speaker or even the ethnic group from which a particular speaker comes from.

The dialect of English Language spoken among educated elite worldwide is called the **'Received Pronunciation' or RP'**. The RP dialect has been acknowledged and endorsed for the teaching and examining of Oral English.

The existing variations created the problem of determining how close to the Received Pronunciation a particular dialect is to ('RP').

3.THE ASSESSMENT OF ORAL ENGLISH BY WAEC

Under the scheme of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination, candidates taking the English Language Test, are expected to take three papers namely:

Paper 1 – Essay Writing, Comprehension and Summary

Paper 2 – Multiple Choice Question (Lexis & Structure)

Paper 3 – Oral English/Test of Oral English(Peculiar to Nigeria)

The examination tests the receptive and productive abilities of candidates in the following areas: Reading Comprehension, Summary, Vocabulary, Lexis and Structure, Listening Comprehension and Recognition of different aspect of English Speech.

The Oral English paper is designed to test candidates' knowledge of Oral English.. The paper is a listening comprehension test made up of multiple choice objective items designed to test recognition of consonants, consonant clusters, vowels, stress, intonation and understanding of dialogue and narratives. The conduct of the test involves the use of Tape Recorders and Compact Disc Players.

The administration and assessment of Oral English has been fraught with problems. These range from the access to Language Laboratories where

recordings of test materials could done, the dearth of qualified examiners, the variations in the dialects of spoken English in Anglophone West Africa to the variations in the scores awarded by examiners .

 Ukwuegbu (1992) observed that in the oral production part of the Oral English paper, there was no recording of the candidates' oral responses to provide a base for assessing the correctness of the scores awarded to the candidate by the examiner as was the case in the written paper. He also averred that the competence of the examiner(s) varied and this ultimately affected the reliability and validity of the scores awarded.

Given this observation, it is apparent that the Oral English Examiner could be influenced by his own idiosyncrasies in determining the correct pronunciation, intonation and stress while assessing candidates in the Oral English test.

Wood (1991) stated that the reliability of grades is crucial in determining the validity of any assessment procedure. **UCLES (1976**) was reported to have issued the following statement which captures the challenges being experienced by examining boards:

> *"This is a field which causes examination boards the greatest concern and no one involved with public examinations could possibly claim that it is less important now than previously. As the number of candidates grows it becomes progressively difficult to ensure that all examiners are marking to the same standard... It be sufficient here to point out that all boards which at present offer certificates based upon external examinations have to take this problem seriously if they are to maintain any credibility, and that it is probably true to say that none of them will ever completely solve it."*

These observations were validated by the findings in a study undertaken by **WAEC (1996)** on the Inter-Rater Reliability of the Oral English assessment in the Senior School Certificate Examination in Nigeria. Twenty-three Oral English examiners were asked to score the oral responses of one hundred candidates. ANOVA, t-test and Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient were used to analyse the scores awarded by examiners. The study found among others that there was a significant variation in the mean scores ranging from 38.38% to 77.58% in the marks awarded by examiners.

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Some educationists have argued that it is difficult to ensure that all examiners are marking to the same standard when large candidates are being tested **UCLES (1976), Boye (1996), Kofitse (2008).**The problem posed by the adequacy of time, numerous speech variety and examiners' idiosyncrasies were cited as monumental challenges.

Premised on these assumptions, and in addition to the challenge of coping with the exponential increase of candidates registering for the examination particularly in Nigeria,(where well over one million candidates register for the examination) **the West African Examinations Council** evolved an alternative paper to the Oral English paper which it called **the Test of Oral English.** This test is however, peculiar to Nigeria**.** It is a multiple choice objective test in which candidates are expected to recognize and produce all the significant sound contrasts in the consonants and vowel system of English, unstressed syllables in words which are otherwise distinguished.

The candidates are also expected to be aware of the forms English intonation takes in relation to the grammar of the language as well as the attitude conveyed by the speaker. The reasons advanced for the adoption of this mode of testing are that it eliminates the difficulties associated with sourcing adequate facilities and competent examiners to carry out recordings for the listening comprehension and production parts of the Oral English test.

This model involves the use of orthographies in representing the spoken words of utterances. It is believed that the international phonetic alphabets provides a precise means of writing down the spoken words of utterances. Phoneticians have developed systems of transcription, using symbols to indicate on paper sound features.

4.   **EMERGING ISSUES**

(1) **What is Being Tested**?

Is the oral test a true assessment of spoken abilities? Is it a true measure of oral proficiency? **Lazaraton** (www.cambridge.com) stated that the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) conducted for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is not a true measure of oral proficiency as displayed in true life situations. **Kofitse (2008)** quoted **Clark and Lett (1988) (** study as having expressed) the view that :

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"oral interviews cannot provide a valid sample of other speech events because it samples a limited domain of interaction".

 The argument was also made that the testing situation is artificial and that examinees in such context are conscious that they are being rated and therefore put under stress.

Such arguments fly in the face of logic because all examinees in whatever subject or format are conscious of the fact that they are being assessed. What should be of primary concern is how to ensure that assessment tools designed to measure competencies in Oral English are able to rate speaking proficiency as demonstrated in the real world.

(2)   **Examiners' Competence**

Is it safe to assume that all those who hold a University Degree in English Language were trained in the oral aspect of the language? Does the acquisition of a degree in English Language sufficiently equip the holder with the necessary skills required to assess proficiency in the language?

Afolabi (*ibid*) observed not all those who serve as examiners of the Oral English test can lay claim to being experts in spoken English. He concluded thus :

> *"Whether or not we want to admit it, we are all drawn into a vortex of moral and ethical challenges by the status of Oral English in our school programme. Where we stand today, the issue of Oral English has gone beyond our mere shrugging of shoulders…the next logical question now is : which way do we go?"*

The assessment of oral proficiency requires special skills. Examiners must be equipped with the essential tools and knowledge in rating the oral responses of examinees. It is only when, by reason of his/her training that the examiner is able to shed the influence of his/her regional variation and is therefore able to make reliable judgements about examinees' responses. Examiners should be able to set aside their own linguistic idiosyncrasies in making judgements about examinees' responses. Added to this is the issue of the reliability of the scores derived from such ratings as expounded by **Ukwuegbu (ibid)** and acknowledged by several research findings. The

award of impressionistic marks that cannot be validated or moderated by other examiners is a major draw-back with the traditional model of assessment of Oral English.

(3) **Validity Options**

The exponential increase in candidature has made it difficult for assessment agencies to assess candidates in practical work in science and the oral aspects of languages.

The dearth of qualified teachers and facilities to teach and examine oral tests as well as cost considerations has made it practically impossible to adopt the traditional model in the assessment of Oral English where a large number of candidates are involved.

In spite of the measured success the Council has achieved in the application of this mode of examining, it had over the period carried out a continuous appraisal of the traditional model.

The model adopted by **the West African Examinations Council** in Nigeria was borne out of the challenges that arose from large candidature that made the use of the traditional model practically impossible. In adopting this option, the Council was mindful of the fact that it is what gets assessed that gets taught in the schools. The knowledge that oral proficiency in English Language would contribute to the overall assessment of candidates encouraged teachers to pay attention and indeed teach the essential elements of pronunciation, stress and intonation. The Council was equally concerned about the need to ensure that the grades reflected on its certificates correctly reflect the competencies assumed to have been acquired by the holders of such certificates.

The application of such models has been criticized under the following assumptions by **Robins (1991**):

- The output of spoken language far exceeds the output of written language. Speech has a perceptible effect on the hearer.

- Speech sounds are not separate and discreet events or actions serially put together to form utterances in the way that the alphabets are serially put together to form printed words. Letters are discreet entities

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that can be put together to produce words; Speech is a continuum which, for the purpose of description may be segmented into speech sounds in order to analyse and symbolize the articulatory movements involved in its production.

He observed that because alphabetic systems vary considerably as regards the closeness they bear to phonetic compositions of the forms they represent, the degree to which they mark the actual pronunciation, stress and intonation may not always match. Just as the same sound sequence may be spelt in several different ways, the same series of letters may represent different sound sequence. He therefore concluded that it is unsafe to assume that any form of written test can sufficiently distil and express such complex oratory skills displayed in actual verbalization. In other words, speech has a '*Gestalt*' quality which makes it more than the sum of its parts.

4. **THE WAY FORWARD**

(1) **Continuous Assessment**

Given the conundrum experienced by examining boards experience as regards the most valid model of testing the oral aspect of languages, the logical question to ask is 'where do we go from here?'

Some educationists have advocated the use of school-based continuous assessment in the evaluation of the spoken aspect of languages. This position however does not eliminate the problem of rater unreliability and the variations in the way different people speak the language. There is of course the issue of mistrust and abuse of the continuous assessment as a valid model of evaluation.

In spite of these limitations, it has been reported by **Finch and Taeduck (2002)** that the model has been successfully used in Korea. The advantage here is that it will afford teachers the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the required skills in the teaching and assessment of Oral English in the classroom.

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(2) <u>The Use of ICT</u>

The application of ICT in present day assessment has had a profound effect on the versatility of testing. The opportunities offered by this new technology has led to the evolution of new testing techniques such as internet based tests (iBT) that are used to measure how well candidates can read, listen, speak and write in English. Examples of such tests are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the Test of Spoken English (TSE).

However, the huge capital outlay associated with the acquisition of the ICT hardware and the level of literacy and infrastructural development in developing economies are major limitations in the adoption of this model. Examining Boards should as a matter of urgency adopt a gradual approach in the application of on-line assessment.

(3) <u>Training of Examiners</u>

Examining Boards should endeavour to organize regular training for examiners to sharpen their skills in rating examinees. Such training should be done alongside with briefings on the approved dialects on pronunciations, stress and intonations as a way of moderating the existing variations in the benchmarks used for assessment of Oral English.

(4) <u>Curriculum Review</u>

There is need to review the English Language curriculum in tertiary institutions to ensure that English Language teachers are thoroughly equipped.

5. <u>CONCLUSION</u>

The assessment of Oral English poses a challenge to Examining Agencies. The various models that have been advocated appear to be fraught with problems. The issue of cultural fairness of test items presents a new level of challenge that we cannot shy away from. The way forward is for examining boards to actively engage in the training of examiners in the assessment of the oral aspect of languages. Effort

should be intensified in the application of ICT tools and techniques as a way of upgrading current assessment procedures.

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