

# **Social and Educational Impact of Language Assessment in Nigeria**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Language assessment serves many purposes in society, such as a means for achieving national language policy goals. It is a tool in language teaching; can motivate learning; and supports the connections between language learning, literacy development and cognitive development. In Nigeria, poor exam performance and low level English proficiency indicate that language teaching and assessment have not sufficiently engendered effective language use. Summative language assessment is practised in ways that hold learners responsible for not learning what is not taught or is improperly taught. Thus, since local languages play little or no role in personal advancement, the society is unable to utilize potential manpower sidelined by poor achievement in English language tests. It is therefore now imperative that the examining bodies and curricula designers appraise their philosophies and practice with a view to aligning language teaching and assessment with national development goals and international best practice.

**Keywords:** *exam malpractice, language assessment, language learning, language proficiency, literacy development*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Regular appraisal of language assessment mechanisms is crucial in ensuring that language fulfils its functions in contemporary society. Language assessment serves many purposes in society by enabling government to enforce its language policy; for example, the Nigerian government could make a credit pass in a Nigerian language a criterion for admission of candidates into institutions of higher learning in a bid to raise the status of local languages. Language assessment, as an aspect of language teaching programmes, is important in education and is a means of equipping the workforce for effective communication. In this regard, recent developments in Nigeria put the credibility of many examinations in question, as universities and organisations no longer rely solely on results from relevant examining bodies and educational institutions in making final decisions on admission or job appointment offers, respectively.

Cheng and Curtis (2004) observe that assessment can be used to correct or minimise social ills in the allocation of opportunities (also Badger & Wilkinson 1998), as well as to upgrade the performance of academic institutions. Testing

and evaluation act as a gatekeeping mechanism (Badger & Wilkinson 1998) and a dynamic instrument for implementing educational policies (Cheng & Curtis 2004). This is because educational targets are intricately linked with socio-cultural and economic development goals, and assessment is the means of measuring and evaluating attainment by individuals and groups. In line with this summation, Cheng and Curtis cites Linn's (2000) summary of the crucial roles that assessments played in educational reforms in the second half of the past century, including tracking and selection, programme accountability, minimum competency testing, school and district accountability, and standards-based accountability.

The above functions have best been served by summative assessment, which measures the amount learnt by the student of what the teacher taught (Hagstrom 2006). On the other hand, formative language assessment provides information for reflecting on teaching effectiveness, appreciation of learners' learning strategies and learning difficulties, and design or revision of teaching styles or approaches. Consequently, self- and peer-assessment are becoming important aspects of language teaching. By empowering learners through autonomous learning and self-assessment, learners are helped to build understanding; recognise and use concepts; and learn to monitor, reflect on, and make judgement as relevant to context (Hagstrom 2006). Each approach to language assessment has impact on language learning, learner and society.

In the following two sections I discuss the relationship between language testing and language learning, and then features and problems of language assessment in Nigeria, as background to the sections on educational and social impact of language assessment in Nigeria.

## 2. LANGUAGE TESTING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Language assessment enables a teacher to find out the competence level of learners and the learners to do self-evaluation. However, language assessment can be a motivator or a demotivator for language learning, depending on the learner and the learning situation. Badger and Wilkinson (1998) observe that language teaching and assessment are inextricably linked and work well together when teachers provide opportunities for learners to try out their literacy competence. Trevisan (2002) reports that various studies show that regular and sound classroom assessments have positive impact on student achievement and well-being, while poor assessment can be detrimental to learning. Moreover, Gipps (1994) cites sources that posit that test increases commitment to learning by making learners to attend to content a second time, encourages learners to actively process content, and directs attention to topics and skills being tested.

Language assessment could be beneficial or detrimental to the connections between language learning, literacy and cognitive development. Literacy learning is language learning (Dunn 2001); and 'cultural and linguistic variables

act as mediating factors affecting semantic and cognitive developmental processes in bilingual children' (Gonzalez 2006: 167). Therefore, care should be taken when introducing the English language to learners at school, since the language of literacy at school (English) is different from the home language. Without the support of communicative language teaching, children are ushered into English language learning on a limp and without crutches, since literacy and school language are both new to the early school child.

It has been established that in bilingual situations knowledge in L1 facilitates L2 learning. Somehow in Nigeria L1 is suppressed so it does not impede the learning of English, a process that may lead to the suppression of the development of cognitive facilities in L1. According to Schiff-Myers, Djukic, McGovern-Lawler and Perez (1993), an uneven transition from L1 to L2 could hamper the learning of L2 and lead to the development of semilingualism. Moreover, to support learners transiting from one language to another, Schiff-Myers et al. (1993) call for caution in language assessment so that learners are not discouraged by poor performance.

Schiff-Myers et al. (1993) also observe that since the extent of exposure to L2 will affect performance, particular situations of learners should determine the approach adopted for testing language performance. A diagnosis of learner's bilingual state, according to Roseberry-McKibbin and O'Hanlon (2005), should indicate: (1) the language learnt first; (2) exposure to, and level of proficiency in, English; (3) the dominant language, (4) if subtractive bilingualism is occurring, and (5) an assessment of the bilingualism process. In light of this, Schiff-Myers et al. (1993) opine that differentiation is necessary to make learning experience rewarding through satisfying the different needs of each group.

Ideally, Nigerian classrooms should emphasise alternative or formative assessments as a means of adequately diagnosing as well as involving learners in their language development process. But the contrary is the case; it is the teacher's knowledge that counts, and students are not led to find out who they are as literacy users, or to reflect on their learning and achievement (Badger & Wilkinson 1998).

Additionally, there are factors outside the classroom that affect language learning and achievement. It is well known that socio-economic backgrounds have impact on language learning and achievement, and that those children from low-income background score lower than children from middle or upper class (Saenz & Huer 2003; Badger & Wilkinson 1998). The socio-economic factor is considered so important in Australia that children of parents on government assistance are placed in schools designated as disadvantaged (Badger & Wilkinson 1998). In Nigeria of today, unlike yesteryears, children from low-income background whose parents cannot afford the fees charged in private schools where learning conditions are far superior populate public schools. It is important that language programmes should be designed to compensate for poor sociolinguistic and literacy backgrounds (Lee and Fradd 1998) so as to bridge

dichotomies developing between children of different socio-economic backgrounds in a nation.

In view of the above, Roseberry-McKibbin and O'Hanlon (2005) suggest that test materials be made appropriate as well as fair to test-takers. As Saenz and Huer (2003) have observed, monolinguals perform better in academic English than bilinguals because tests are normed in English. Similarly, in Nigeria language tests fail to take into consideration the environment and (in) experience of test-takers – the city dweller has access to multimedia communication while the rural dweller is at home with farming culture; but texts and exams are designed by urban dwellers. This disparity could be minimised if language teaching is enriched with resources that compensate for the lack in real life experience of learners. Most Nigerian learners obviously do not receive adequate teaching and exposure to language use that will sufficiently prepare them for achievement and proficiency tests.

### 3. FEATURES AND PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN NIGERIA

‘The assessment of a student's performance is placed on just one examination either for admission to or for the award of a particular certificate’ (Nwagwu 1997: 92). Nevertheless, such exams do not test communicative skills necessary for performing real life tasks.

In primary and secondary schools, summative assessment for promoting students from one grade level to another is composed of continuous assessment and exam scores. However, to transit from primary to secondary education, some states and a federal examination body conduct examinations for the placement of pupils in schools. In addition, each state conducts its own junior secondary school certificate examination, while NECO (National Examination Council) conducts similar examination for unity schools across the country. NECO and WAEC (West African Examination Council) administer separate senior secondary school certificate examinations (SSCE) at different times of the year, the results of which are acceptable alone or combined (and in conjunction with results of qualifying exams) for admission of students into institutions of higher learning. However, a state has opted out of NECO exams on the grounds that it is lowering standards (Allafrica.com 2008). Further, the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) is responsible for conducting qualifying exams into tertiary institutions, and the English language paper is compulsory.

The SSCE examinations in English are made up of three papers administered in two sittings, with Papers 2 and 3 done at the same time. Paper 1 is made up of an essay, two comprehension passages and a summary paper. Paper 2 contains 100 multiple-choice questions on lexis and structure, while Paper 3 tests oral English, which teaching and testing are however not based on taped texts. It is also observed that the limited time allowed for marking could encourage

markers to employ speed-enhancing strategies that could deprive a student's script a deserved fair attention. In addition, some markers have observed that some recommended answers are wrong but upheld, to the detriment of test-takers that may have given the best response.

Exam malpractices (Alutu and Aluede 2006), unfortunately, are regular features of certificate and qualifying exams administration in Nigeria. In fact, it has become a hydra-headed problem in which people of different calibres participate. Perhaps this problem can be traced to inadequacies in language teaching as well as the fear of failing exams in a certificate-dependent society that also has very little opportunity for youth development outside of tertiary education.

The problems of language assessment in Nigeria start with a national language policy that is not backed with a political will. Consequently, language teaching and assessment are not tailored towards attaining the objective of the policy on language education, which aims at integrating people through multilingualism, and the language in education policy. In addition, there are insufficient books to support mother tongue education for the first three years of primary education, as prescribed in the policy on education (Emenanjo, Alajuruonye, Ikediashi, Okolie, Ugwuoke, and Ikonne 2003). Teachers are insufficiently trained and in short supply. Poor linguistic abilities of the teachers themselves are transmitted to learners' and therefore their exam performance and future studies (Taiwo 1980). Taiwo had observed that: 'although many of the teachers in the primary school system (including the Grade II and the uncertified teachers), were dedicated, their own deficiencies in academic background and professional competence set a limitation to their performance and the children's attainment' (pp.145–146).

A system characterised by inadequacy of teachers also lacks specialists and programmes for diagnosing and identifying learners with special needs or special needs of students so that they could be attended to early in the learning process. Generally, most learners swim or sink. Moreover, educational development is teacher-dependent, so that the learner often depends on what is taught in the classroom to learn the English language with little or no input from outside the classroom. Language teaching is textbook-based; but most students do not have access to textbooks. This limits how much of the curriculum content is covered before major exams, and learners' experience in the target language. Therefore, certificate and qualifying language tests are generally beyond what has been taught test-takers, and therefore unfair.

The inadequacy of textbooks and literature text availability ratios, as well as other teaching and learning resources, characterise public schools. Further, since information and communication technologies (ICT) are still a novelty to many, they are not being exploited for solving educational problems. Teachers are not computer literate, and may lack the motivation to acquire computer literacy or surf the Internet for teaching materials and innovative ideas. Indeed, Nigerian teachers could be said to be in a world of their own, isolated from developments in language teaching elsewhere.

Thus an irony observed by Taiwo (1980) still holds true today, that the standard of English taught and spoken in Nigeria is falling despite increased functional literacy. Learners are exposed to corrupt models, which some children are incidentally learning as their first language.

#### 4. EDUCATIONAL IMPACT OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN NIGERIA

There is no doubt that language assessment has been useful in Nigeria's educational system and socio-economic environment. Employment and admission of applicants and candidates by organisations and institutions will surely be cumbersome without the efforts of examination bodies. Their existence and continued patronage bear credence to their importance in the development of language in the society. However, it has become obvious that language teaching and assessment are not meeting the academic, workplace and development needs of contemporary Nigeria.

Although curricula are regularly revised there is no indication that language assessment is part of the consideration for revision or that revisions have impacted on language assessment and learning. Among other inadequacies, Awobuluyi (1998) assesses curricula as learner unfriendly, because items that learners are expected to master are complex and abstract, and Emenanjo (1998) observes that the poor state of resources and low level of teacher training are likely to reduce the effectiveness of curricula changes. Consequently, Tahir (2005) found that most learners are unable to understand exam instructions well after primary four, when they are expected to be proficient enough to learn in the language. In the absence of remediation, foundational problems in language learning tend to crystallise and inhibit learning at higher levels.

The falling standards of English language use at all levels of education indicate that most learners are unable to overcome problems that they encounter learning the language. Lack of confidence in English language use is most critical when learners have to sit for their O'level English exams and is evident in exam-takers employing unorthodox methods to circumvent poor performance. Exam malpractices have become so rampant that many prospective exam-takers do not frown at them or see them as wrongdoings (Alutu and Aluede 2006).

Partly due to the impact of exam malpractices, but mainly because of outdated and inefficient method of teaching language, which does not lead to effective language use, and also because language assessment has some shortcomings, incongruence often exists between learners' proficiency and what their results suggest. It is often observed in screening exercises that many candidates with high grades perform dismally, while many expected to perform below required proficiency level make better attempts at using the language. Thus, passes in O'level exams may not be clear passes and failures may not indicate an inability to communicate in the language – that is, a result may not

depict a learner's true competence in English. Perhaps, the language tests concentrate on linguistic items and fail to assess effectiveness in the use of the language. Further, it is also known that students differ in the type of tasks that they excel in (Clapham 2001), and therefore, an achievement examination should be made broad enough to cater for individual differences.

However, the question still remains on what an 'A' or a 'C' in the English language exam means. Ogundipe (2004) found that a group of polytechnic students, whose scores in English had qualified for tertiary education, could perform somewhat well in literal comprehension of written texts but not at higher levels. Matemilola (2004) made similar finding of certificate holders in the Yoruba language. These findings suggest that language teaching and testing in Nigeria may not be contributing to the development of communicative competence in learners.

Poor linguistic development is bound to stunt an individual's intellectual development and/or expression of knowledge in other subject areas, since language is the medium for the reception and expression of knowledge. It is likely that some students' achievement in other subjects/courses do not reflect the extent of their knowledge in the area due to their inability to express what they have in mind. This problem also results from language being taught and learnt in isolation (of content areas), rather than integratedly – learners are taught, and they themselves consider, English as a subject on its own, rather than also as a means that facilitate learning and expression in other areas. Communication and language skills learnt in English are seen as just relevant for passing the English exam, and are not utilized in other subject areas, and indeed personal life development.

A wider impact of poor language teaching and assessment in society is the waste of time and other resources expended on educating people. Moreover, additional cost is incurred by universities and corporate bodies in conducting English proficiency tests, to assess what has already been supposedly tested – certificates are seen as no longer reflecting proficiency or competence levels. Usually, additional training is required, as in general studies programmes created in tertiary institutions to brush up new entrants on the use of English. However, the teaching, examining and outcomes of such efforts may be similar to those of earlier exams, as they too also fail to emphasise the relationship between such learning and candidates' primary fields of study.

## 5. SOCIAL IMPACT OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN NIGERIA

Exam results differentiate schools, institutions and states from one another. Candidates' performance in national examinations is inherent in the rating and status accorded a school, tertiary institution or state due to 'variation in "standards" among schools and institutions' (Bande 2001: 5). For practical reasons, it has become necessary to use differentiation in the admission of

students into federal secondary (unity) schools and institutions of higher learning using the quota system to maintain the principle of federal character. In many instances, the difference between cut-off points for different states could be staggering; for example, out of 800 points obtainable, a state merited a cut-off point of 450 (that is 56%) while another merited only 156 points (or 20%) in the 2008 qualifying examination into federal secondary schools in Nigeria (Sam 2008); the students having sat for the same examination. It should be obvious that putting students with such wide differing performance in the same class will have its drawbacks if no steps are taken to bring the low performing students up to par with those with superior performance. This is the case and such gaps are usually not bridged throughout the schooling period, since the poor performing students often fail to catch up on their own. Similar practice and experience obtain in higher institutions.

Without national examinations, it would be very difficult to assess individuals from different schools and states and the schools and states themselves. Although no qualifying examination is based on achievement in the English language alone, English is *the* gatekeeper or determinant of admission into higher levels, educational, social or political – without an adequate performance in the English language exam an individual is pegged (down). In other words, passing English is not the only criterion for admission, but failing English could constitute the only criterion for denial of admission. Further, whereas proficiency in English is important in the comprehension of, and performance in, other subjects, there are instances where an otherwise intelligent student is unable to figure out how to successfully tackle the English language examination paper, and therefore cannot make headway in life. Moreover, since not much attention is given to local languages, those proficient in their mother tongue but not in English are lost through the sieve of English language assessment. The government may need to look into this state of affairs in pursuing its language and national development policies, so as to utilise individuals in society and save them from perniciousness.

Those that can speak English and pass the language exams are perceived as being intelligent. The fall-out of this assumption is the proliferation of private primary and secondary schools that use English predominantly, whereas in public schools local languages hold sway. Superior performances of candidates from private primary and secondary institutions in national examinations give credence to these assumptions. Now, the children of the poor attend public schools while the children of the rich attend private schools. It is also observed that unlike in the 1960–90s when public school teachers preferred to have their children in the school where they taught, today, those that can afford it put their children in private schools as well. This practice could reduce teachers' dedication to duty as it does the commitment of concerned government officials to efficient management of the education system. Gradually, the children of the poor are being edged out of opportunities in the society through poor implementation of language policies, among other deficiencies in the education system, which engenders poor academic achievement.

Thus, socio-economic status is having impact on exam performance as well as language use; and the language policy that was designed to support multilingualism through mother tongue education (and a second local language learning) now appears to be inhibiting learning in other areas, so much so that some academics are calling for the abolition of mother tongue education in Nigerian schools. The premise of their suggestion is not farfetched from the fact that children grow up not being sufficiently proficient in any language, and children in public schools appear to be short-changed in the process.

More detrimental to the individual and national language development, however, is that in reality no official or public functions are assigned to local languages, allowing the English language to rule in all significant domains. Since the teaching and development of local languages receive little attention from federal and state governments, as well as language groups and individuals, the death of Nigerian languages is imminent.

The language assessment process frustrates a host of individuals whose ambition is tied to passing the English language exam, and who may consequently live below their potentials. After having spent so much time in school and made several futile attempts, failure to pass the English language paper may disorient individuals and lead to stunted personal development, except urgent step is taken to divert such individuals' potentials to other areas that are not dependent on passing the English language exam. Whereas many centres professing capability to help candidates pass their exams are on the increase, there are no true remedial or communicative language development centres that can truly assist one in attaining sufficient proficiency for professional training or job placement. Since not everybody needs to be an academician, the introduction and promotion of English for specific purposes is long overdue, and should be supported by government to make such programmes affordable by the ordinary person.

Too much emphasis on certification rather than the development of communicative competence and skills has increased the level of corruption in society and sometimes engender violence when people defend unorthodox methods they are employing to pass an exam. It is important for the government back language and literacy development betimes so as not to breed too many hooligans in the society through its compulsory schooling (universal basic education) that does not lead to true literacy. This becomes more important considering that the degeneration of economic, physical and social infrastructures has drained the system of private capital development, and frustrated and constrained the informal sector from developing initiatives that can absorb school dropouts; thus, the unhealthy dependence on certificates for socio-economic survival.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dunn (2001) highlights the complexities of relationships between language, literacy and power. If information is power, only those that have the language to access it can be empowered. The significance of this assertion is obvious in a country with limited opportunities for a teeming population of great diversities and potentialities. Notwithstanding the burden of development confronting the Nigerian government, it needs to see development from the perspective of individual transformation. In the world of today, language proficiency is a key factor in personal as well as national advancement. Since language acquisition is an individual issue and the government has committed itself to enforcing compulsory basic education, providing conditions sufficient for the individual to learn the language(s) of education should be made the focus of language development and assessment.

Language assessment is an instrument for achieving socio-political goals. Since language assessment is so important in manipulating a system (Badger & Wilkinson 1998, Cheng & Curtis 2004) the government is in the position to *practically* enforce its language policy through language assessment while providing an enabling context for optimum language learning. On the other hand, since language is only a means of communication, early cognitive development of the learner should not be compromised through ambivalence in language policy design and implementation. Effort should be made to discountenance the growing perception that local languages are inadequate for education, for as Dunn (2001) surmises of Aboriginal English dialects in Australia, Nigerian languages are fully developed linguistic systems, and using them will not create developmental inadequacy in the learner if teaching is well managed. If mother tongue education is given sufficient attention, the products of basic education could be empowered and sufficiently equipped in at least one language (rather than allowing the development of semilinguals) to participate in political, social and economic development in society.

Globalisation is the buzzword and incidentally implies Englishisation, but also localisation, and ICT is an appropriate channel for all (Christopher 2006). Nigeria is well under way with the diffusion of telecommunications, and can employ it for improving teaching skills throughout the country, as done in many countries through distance learning programmes. Globalisation and ICT are also having impact on the way language is being taught, especially by the use of communicative approaches and the encouragement of autonomy in language learning. Expectedly, changes are equally taking place in language assessment which Nigerian teachers should be abreast with. Summative tests are important, but formative assessment is productive in assessing and improving learning. Furthermore, tests should not just be convenient for the test-giver but should also be designed to be test-taker friendly. Moreover, in extending some powers to the learner, test-taking strategies should be taught learners in the course of language teaching.

It is time to appraise language assessment in Nigeria by raising and answering questions, such as: Is it geared towards the attainment of national policies on language? What role should language assessment play in language and national development? Could there be a need to redesign language policies and language assessment in Nigeria? What are the developments and trends in language assessment elsewhere and how can language assessment in Nigeria be aligned with best practices? Again, if the typical Nigerian child is made the central point of language assessment, language teaching should be made more responsive and relevant to learners and their environment.

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