

Lagos Journal of Contemporary Studies in Education
ISSN: 3043-9075 E-ISSN: 3043-6834
Volume 2, Issue 3, August 2024, 387-394
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36349/lajocse.2024.v02i03.25>
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**“TEST OF ORALS” OR “ALTERNATIVE TO TEST OF ORALS”: AN APPRAISAL OF THE
TEST OF ORALS EXAMINATION BY SELECT EXAMINATION BODIES IN NIGERIA.**

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ABSTRACT

Despite the very huge importance of the oral skills of listening and speaking in language development, in teaching and learning, and of course teachers' efforts in teaching these oracy skills, it is unfortunate that this aspect of the English Language is not adequately and appropriately assessed by examining bodies in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, discusses the importance of testing the oracy skills and describes how these ill-assessed skills can be properly assessed as it appraises the test of orals examinations conducted by both the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) in Nigeria. It also examines an array of techniques that can be utilized to grade performance in oral achievement tests. The paper concludes that what these examining bodies do in the guise of testing oral language performance falls short of the ideal. It is therefore recommended that WAEC and NECO rename their English Language, Paper 3: Test of Orals “Alternative to Test of Orals” if it is practically difficult to examine that aspect of the language as it should ideally be done in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Alternative to Test of Orals, Appraisal, Examination, Examining Bodies, Test of Orals*

INTRODUCTION

The oral aspect of any language is an important part of that language as it concerns the rules of how words are pronounced and the overall speaking of the language. The oral aspect of any language is that part of the language covers the articulation of sounds in the language. This important language aspect incorporates

speaking, listening, and oral skills in any language entail learning how spoken words are articulated, what words and expressions mean, and how to pass on ideas. Baron (2023) explains that the oral feature of language is an intricate system that associates sounds and what they mean, that humans employ to communicate with one another through speaking and listening. He notes that although the oral aspect of language by definition banks heavily on speaking and listening, it is made up of some different elements that collaborate to generate meaning from sounds; these elements are vocabulary skills, phonological skills, grammatical skills, and pragmatics. He claims that these skills lay the foundation of someone's abilities to understand when reading and listening, and they are perfect predictors of future academic achievement in learners as early as pre-school (Baron, 2023). This is because no one is born a master orator; rather oral language skills take time to evolve and a concerted effort to master.

Historically, before the advent of writing systems, many ancient people had their oral traditions; they depended on the spoken language to transmit their proverbs, collective memory and knowledge, social beliefs/values, prayers as well as entertainment such as nursery rhymes, songs, riddles, tales, and dramas. Many cultures with oral traditions survive around the world to date, not only in Africa but also in Europe and North America (Hayes, 2023). This buttresses the fact that the oral aspect or the verbal feature of language is an integral aspect of human development and socialisation.

As Hayes (2023) further notes, people make use of oral language skills in numerous ways; they depend on their oral language skills to share information, express their feelings, and share advice, as well as to persuade and entertain others, and to store memories. The oral aspect of language, which covers both speaking and listening skills, is a feature that human beings are aware of, but not everyone develops these skills adequately. Scholars (Heron, 2019; Hayes, 2023) have posited a variety of factors that could influence why some people will develop competence in each of the two components of oral language while others will not. As such, it is germane to ensure proper teaching and learning of this important aspect of language – especially in a second language situation like the English language in Nigeria.

Thus, the oral aspect of the English language has been a constant area that students learn in schools and colleges in Nigeria – from primary school till they graduate from the university. This area of the English language is being learned as sounds in primary school, speech work in the Junior Secondary School, and Oral English at the Senior Secondary School level. The oral aspect of the language is also examined as a requirement for earning a credit pass in the English Language by both the National Examinations Council (NECO) and the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) as encapsulated in Paper 3 of their Senior School Certificate Examinations. However, it has been established that this essential component of the

language is not adequately examined by these examination bodies and that the title of Paper 3 (Test of Orals) is not correctly ascribed to it.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTING THE ORACY SKILLS

As explained above, oral skills involve speaking and listening skills, which should be properly tested to ascertain the level of competence of the speakers of any language. There is some importance in testing the oracy skills of English language learners in Nigeria – as a second language learning environment. Oracy skills are significant in the thinking process (Mah, 2016) and they enable students to communicate their ideas effectively in different contexts (Alexander, 2013). They constitute essential skills across all disciplines in higher education and unlike conversation, it need to be consciously taught and nurtured via interaction with other skills in an educational setting (Mercer & Dawes, 2014). In the career world, oral communication skills have been established as among the most required graduate employability skills (Jackson 2014), and it has been observed that presentation skills especially are key for work life (Ritchie 2016).

Although the problems of students of English as a second language are well chronicled (Aguilar, 2016; Basturkmen, 2016), further assistance has been made available through outlets such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. However, research have also established that all learners, linguistic background notwithstanding, may encounter some difficulties speaking in groups or seminars (Remedios, Clarke & Hawthorne, 2008). Clinton and Kelly (2017) think that during group discussions some learners often experience communication problems that they may not encounter in lectures and that oral presentations especially can be a challenge. As such, having and building effective and efficient oral skills, which include listening and speaking skills (Caspersz & Stasinska, 2015), are viewed as essential attributes for both secondary schools and higher institution graduates. Thus, testing oracy skills in students at the secondary level of education is an important task that examination bodies must undertake. According to Naga and Everhart (2022), testing oral proficiency allows users of the language to effortlessly attain a fluent level of communication. It increases their proficiency in the usage and speaking of the language because the other two skills of reading and writing are dependent on the oracy skills of listening and speaking. They add that various forms of means are available in the testing of oracy skills. Some include computer-administered tests, live, interactive sessions, and even the pen and paper versions, which they described as often inadequate. This pen-and-paper form, which is currently the adopted mode of testing the oral aspect of the English Language by WAEC and NECO is the focus of this paper.

APPRAISING THE TEST OF ORALS EXAMINATIONS CONDUCTED BY WAEC AND NECO

Since their inception (WAEC in 1952 and NECO in 1999), the two major examination bodies in Nigeria for the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations have been conducting the English Language Paper 3 with the title “Test of Orals”. This examination is a pen-and-paper examination that involves the setting of questions on such areas involved in the speaking and listening skills of students of the English language, such areas as the vowel and consonant sounds of English as a language, stress patterns and the intonation patterns of the language among some other areas. The questions are structured in a way that the area being tested is adjudged with various options which contain one correct answer and three other wrong options. However, since this method of testing the oracy skills of the students is printed, it is rather inadequate to test the speaking and listening skills of these candidates as necessary. An appropriate test of orals or oracy should make the examinee articulate the sounds or words being examined while equally listening to the articulation of words in the language they are being tested in. It could, therefore, be affirmed that the test of orals currently conducted by the two examination bodies under this study is inadequate.

In comparison with what is obtained in WAEC and NECO, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are bodies that conduct the right tests of orals in the English language. TOEFL and IELTS written by Nigerians to travel for educational purposes to English-speaking countries have continued to pose a challenge to examinees arising from the inefficacy of the WAEC and NECO tests of orals. These two tests test the candidate’s listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities – with the first two proving difficult for the test takers because they have no experience with them due to the improper test of orals, they were exposed to at the Senior School Certificate Examination level.

Scholars have studied the effect of this WAEC and NECO test of orals on various aspects of teaching and learning of the subject. Ibrahim and Bello (2020), report that the WAEC test of orals has impacted the teaching pedagogy of teachers in secondary schools in Nigeria. This is so because teachers tailor their teaching towards isolated sound segments and not towards the practical nature of the subject which is in line with the focus of the exam, purely multiple-choice item format. It was equally observed that teachers emphasized oral drills and exercises in isolation. This constitutes a negative influence on students as such isolated oral drills usually cannot alone reflect the defined construct in oracy development. Also, Akanya and Omachonu (2019) found out that the tests of orals conducted by WAEC and NECO are inadequate as Nigerians as L2 learners are still identified with one difficulty or another in English. They observed that the unintelligible and poor performance observed in test takers was predominantly in the phonological (pronunciation) aspect of the subject, which is the aspect test of orals covers.

Akanya and Omachonu (2019) further add that the sixty (60) items each in the WAEC and NECO tests of oral English examination only examine testees' ability to link symbols with sounds. The implication is that these tests only prepare learners to pass examinations and not for competence in communicating in the English language. It becomes very pertinent, therefore, to incorporate oral production into the test since the success or otherwise of testees in the examination might be analogous to the outside world. Furthermore, their study revealed the necessity of an alternative 'A' as against the current oral English paper which is predominantly mere knowledge acquisition based. In addition, the content of WAEC and NECO tests of orals is grossly inadequate as the tests are theory-based rather than practical as they should be. The syllabuses do not provide criterion-referenced tests. In other words, only the skill of recognition is examined. It is a fact that oral English is speech and listening, therefore speaking should be integral to the development of that aspect of language.

HOW CAN THESE ILL-ASSESSED SKILLS BE PROPERLY ASSESSED AND GRADED?

It is on the premise that the two main examination bodies in Nigeria (WAEC and NECO) have adopted the easy-way-out approach, of pen-and-paper tests for their test of orals, this paper proposes viable alternatives to the current approach being adopted by these bodies. According to Hayes (2023), oral language development in students has been traced to literacy development and later academic success. In the classroom and at the level of assessment, educators can examine oral language in a variety of ways, among which are through the use of tools like oral prompts, picture prompts, oral summaries, and oral interviews. Hayes (2023) explains that the oral prompts could come in the form of the teacher asking the student an open-ended question. Students' answers are then assessed for targeted oral English elements being assessed. Oral prompts could be calibrated and aligned with the specific academic goals and standards outlined by the curriculum but this is dependent on the level of the students as they can be utilised to ask learners to clarify story ideas, paraphrase other oral information, give multi-step directions, offer a report on a topic, make inferences, analyse information, or even deliver a speech, with emphasis paid to how words and sounds are pronounced.

The viable alternative to the pen-and-paper version is the use of computer-based tests of orals. This option allows students taking the examinations to listen to prerecorded passages and clips before asking them to select options listed for questions asked on the passage listened to. The computer also allows the test takers to pronounce words that have been shown on the screen within the required duration of time allotted to that question item. This is a feature that allows both the listening and speaking aspects of the orals of English to be adequately tested as they are currently done by TOEFL and IELTS.

According to Naga and Everhart (2022), apart from the computer-administered tests, live and interactive sessions could be employed in the administration of tests of orals. In this form of test administration, students will meet with an already-approved panel of test administrators. These individuals will provide them with the rules and procedures for the test and the students will be provided with the materials they would need. The students are then given some time to review their syllabi and practice before the start of the test. Usually, such a test will be conducted in small rooms with 3 or 4 teachers of English who are proven to be good at teaching the language. These teachers will ask questions during the test and grade their performance. The areas of coverage will include all that the students have been taught and materials for such tests will include tape recorders and microphones for the students to listen to and pronounce the words and sentences given to them properly.

CONCLUSION

This paper has established the fact that the English Language test of orals as currently being conducted by WAEC and NECO is inadequate and improperly named. It has also been established that the test affects the learning ability of students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and even the teaching methodology adopted by teachers. This study has equally examined and established the importance of teaching and learning oracy skills in schools and Nigeria because they are the windows to the acquisition of proper reading and writing skills in any language. Several kinds of literature have been reviewed and examined to further buttress the fact that the examination bodies responsible for these high-stakes tests usually envision that their tests would bring about positive influence; studies on these examinations have shown debits rather than credits. This study has also brought to the fore the fact that the inadequacy of the current testing methods for the English Language tests of orals has failed Nigerians in more standardised international English Language oral and written tests.

As such, this discourse has also opened the fact that aside from the shortage of the studied test in representing the construct of communicative use of the oral language in its entirety, it has also had far-reaching negative consequences on teaching and learning of that important aspect of the English language as it is largely theoretical than practical that it should be. In terms of teaching, these tests have encouraged teachers to only teach aspects found in the printed test while ignoring other skills involved in oracy development such as listening and speaking. This has thus made the test invalid as a viable way to assess learners' oral abilities because openness and validity are absent in these tests, whereas these features have been identified among the features of a good language test. From the foregoing, this paper thus concludes that what these examining bodies do in the guise of testing oral language performance falls short of the ideal. It is also concluded that there is an urgent need to immediately jettison the current ways of testing the

orals of the English Language by these bodies as they need to embrace more practical ways of testing this important aspect of the language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that:

- a) WAEC and NECO should rename their English Language Paper 3: Test of Orals “Alternative to Test of Orals” if it is practically difficult to examine that aspect of the language as it should ideally be done in Nigeria.
- b) Since WAEC and NECO conduct practical examinations in science subjects, a practical test of orals in English should not be an issue. If it is, then the name of the examination should be named “Alternative to the test of orals.
- c) The examination bodies should provide means of ensuring the proper test of orals as is done in such examinations like the TOEFL or IELTS.
- d) Secondary schools in Nigeria should be encouraged to provide language laboratories for their students' learning of the English language orals

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