



Research Article

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Benchmarking of the English Language Component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations in Ghana against the WASSCE English Language Component

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Abstract

This paper was purposed on benchmarking the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations (MSEE) (administered in Ghana by universities to select undergraduate candidates) to the English language component of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) which constitutes the mainstream Ghanaian university undergraduate entrance examination. The qualitative design (specifically, multiple case study design) was employed for this study. Using the multi-stage sampling technique, six Ghanaian universities (from whom eighteen English language component of the MSEE past questions were elicited) and three sets of the WASSCE English language component past questions administered in 2016, 2017 and 2018) were used for the study. O'Leary's (2014) eight steps of conducting document analysis were used to analyse the data. The study revealed that there are major mismatches between the two sets of examinations in the areas of the test types, the basic language skills tested and the competences tested. The study advanced, to policy makers, suggestions such as testing Speaking and Listening for the improvement of the two sets of examinations.

Keywords: Benchmarking, Ghana, MSEE, University entrance examination, WASSCE

1. Introduction

Benchmarking is crucial in the maintenance of standards and/or improvement of standards of performances of organisations (Pervaiz & Ahmed, 1998). That is, for organisations to perform at acceptable levels, it is usually important that their practices are compared with prevailing practices either within or outside the same organisation. Educational institutions and examination bodies are no exception in this regard (Corniam & Falvey, 1997; Sykes & Wilson, 1998; Falvey & Corniam, 2002). Bernett (1999) defines benchmarking as a cyclical methodological process of setting standards which are aimed at improving quality of performance. Benchmarking also aims at providing educators with the necessary information which undergirds curriculum evaluation (Muijtjens, Schuwirth, Cohen-Schotanus, Thoben & Van der Vleuten, 2008). York (1999) opines that benchmarking involves a continuous process of comparing the performances of an entity against the performances of others with the ultimate motive of using the results of the comparison to raise performance levels. Benchmarking is equally applicable in educational institutions (Tannenbaum & Baron, 2015).

One way of understanding how educational institutions or examination bodies are performing as regards their maintenance and/or upgrading of their standards is through the study of how individual examinations compare with others (Corniam & Falvey, 1997; Sykes & Wilson, 1998; Falvey & Corniam, 2002). Therefore, researchers have paid considerable attention to benchmarking English language examinations with the aim of improving performances or clarity regarding the conduct of various examinations in different parts of the world (Kornblum & Garschick, 1992; Thomas & Monoson, 1993; Grant, 1997; Corniam & Falvey, 1997; Sykes & Wilson, 1998; Falvey & Corniam, 2002). Falvey and Corniam (2002), for instance, examined the model of English language which should be used as a standard model for English language teacher benchmarking in Hong Kong in the areas of pronunciation, stress, intonation, discourse, syntax and morphology while Kantacıoğlu, Thomas, O'Dwyer and O' Sullivan (2010) investigated and presented initial findings from the familiarisation, standardisation and empirical validation stages of the Bilkent University School of English Language's attempt to link its Certificate of Proficiency in English (COPE) examination to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR).

Evidence from these extant literature on benchmarking of English language examinations from different parts of the world suggest that the situation in Ghana, unfortunately, is not ideal. That is, studies within the Ghanaian setting that pay attention to the benchmarking of university English language entrance examinations remain scarce, and same is the case for benchmarking of the English language component of the MSEE to the WASSCE English language component. This constitutes a knowledge lacuna that needs to be addressed. This study is, therefore, purposed on benchmarking the English language component of the MSEE to the English language component of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) how do the test items used in the English language component of the MSEE compare with that of the WASSCE? (2) how do the basic language skills tested in the English language component of the MSEE compare with those tested in the WASSCE English language component? and (3) to what extent to do the competences tested in the English language component of the MSEE compare with those tested in the WASSCE English language component?

In Anglophone West Africa, the West African Examinations Council's (WAEC) West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and its equivalents are used by universities to select candidates for placement into various undergraduate courses of study. For over four decades now, the WASSCE is a standardised examination in which all candidates answer the same questions across the country. The examination is conducted in May/June for school candidates and October/November for private candidates. With respect to the procedure for the school candidates, the entry period is September to November, and it lasts between six to eight weeks. School authorities register their candidates and upload their candidates' entry data on-line; the candidates' continuous assessment scores are, however, presented on CDs to WAEC. For the private candidates, the entry period is from February to May, and registration is done online. For the private candidates who register through accredited private institutions, the registration is done offline.

With respect to the subjects examined, the core subjects are: English Language, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Social Studies. For the elective subjects, candidates select specific subject areas based on the programme that they pursue. The programmes available are Agriculture, Business, Technical, Vocational, Visual Arts, General Programme and General Science. Candidates are expected to write either three or four of the electives and have a minimum of three passes in these elective subjects plus passes in all the four core subjects to be deemed qualified for university placement. With regard to the grading system of the WASSCE, candidates who score between A₁ to C₆ for a particular subject are deemed to have passed that particular subject. Grades ranging between D₇ to F₉ are considered weak and may not be able to aid candidates to secure university placement (<https://www.waecgh.org/EXAMS/WASSCE.aspx>).

Another popular route in Ghana through which individuals who are desirous of gaining admission into universities (for undergraduate studies) use is an examination organised internally by the universities to select candidates for placement. This examination is known as "Mature Students'

Entrance Examinations". Candidates are deemed qualified to write this examination on condition that they are not less than twenty-five years of age. Candidates must, additionally, have prior working experience (recognition of prior learning) in the fields that they seek to study. The common practice is that candidates are examined in four areas – English language, Mathematics, Science and a subject specific paper. Candidates are expected to pass all the papers before they are considered for placement.

Three reasons inform the conduct of this study. Firstly, this study deals with one of the lacunae existing in the Ghanaian higher education language assessment landscape. Although the English language component of the MSEE has been practiced over two decades by Ghanaian universities as part of their selection of undergraduate candidates, there has not been any documented empirical study to inform stakeholders on how this examination compares with the WASSCE English language component which constitutes the mainstream Ghanaian university entrance examination. This study, therefore, makes a crucial contribution by bringing to the fore the similarities and differences in the areas of the basic language skills and competencies tested by the two sets of examinations. Second, as the first study on the benchmarking of the MSEE English language component to the WASSCE English language component in Ghana, this study is intended to set the pace for further researches to be conducted into other pertinent areas of the two sets of examinations with the ultimate aim of improving them or maintaining perceived high standards already in practice. Lastly, an understanding of the similarities and differences between the two sets of examinations in the areas of the basic language skills and the competences tested will enable stakeholders such as potential students, language assessors, university managers and successive governments to develop and institute germane strategies that can better both sets of examinations.

1.1 Test items used in English language examinations

On the tasks involved in English language examinations, the literature suggests that there are many types of questions, and each has particular competence(s) that it seeks to assess. Researchers such as Bachman and Palmer (1982), Kunnan (1995), Davey et al. (2007), Everson (2009) and Powers (2010) have all conducted various investigations with the aim of coming out with the answers to getting the most appropriate examination questions that can measure, comprehensively, candidates' readiness to handle higher learning tasks. Buck (1988), for instance, examined the difficulties in examining listening comprehension in Japanese university entrance examinations. The findings revealed that listening comprehension test items such as noise tests, ordinary written cloze, dictation and sentence elicitation are rather negative approaches to examining listening comprehension. On the contrary, short answer comprehension questions, open-ended longer questions, picture recognition tasks, diagramme completion tasks and grid completion are appropriate ways of testing test takers of the English language component of the Japanese university entrance examinations. On his part, Powers (2010) indicates that examinations that are used to ascertain the proficiency levels of candidates who take university entrance examinations have to be comprehensive. Powers adds that it is only when such examinations are comprehensive (measuring writing, listening, reading and speaking which constitute broader traits of communication) that the results can be regarded as reliable.

A review of English entrance examinations was conducted on the TOEIC by Chapman and Newfields (2008). It was found that the TOEIC, which is used by the majority of universities in Japan (Japan Institute of Lifelong Learning Report, 2008) had seen some principal changes such as the adaptation of a variety of accents (US, British, Canadian, Australia and New Zealand) to the listening component to complement the already existing North American accents. The overall duration of most of the listening and reading tasks was additionally measured, and the 20 4-option multiple choice (MC) photo was changed to 10 4-option photo statements. Moreover, 30 short conversations with 4-option MCQs were changed to ten longer conversations made up of three 4-option MCQs each. Also, 20 sentence level MC error recognition exercises were changed to 12 4-option MCQ blank word sentences embedded in a text. Despite the changes that the test witnessed, Chapman and Newfields

(2008: 33) indicate that “although we laud changes made in the 2006 revision of the TOEIC, in our opinion the changes have not been comprehensive enough”. They cite areas of concern such as the test still being predominantly MCQ format, listening sections being presented in a way as to allow candidates to read the items and their corresponding possible answers (which makes it doubtful if it is truly measuring listening skills, and not reading comprehension) and the questions predominantly dealing with sentence-based comprehension instead of discourse level comprehension. Consequently, the validity (Douglas, 1992; Buck, 2001; Hirai, 2002; Chapman, 2005) of the maiden TOEIC has been criticised because of the weaknesses highlighted.

Chapman and Newfields (2008) recommend that more varieties of Asian English should be included (because the majority of the test takers come from Asia), that TOEIC should depart from demanding descriptive responses from test takers to demanding extensive narrative/descriptive responses, that printed questions and answers in the listening section should be avoided and that alternate response formats (other than the usual MC format) be integrated. They further suggest that TOEIC moves away from sentential level tasks, gives more room for extensive note taking and provides a productive language ability component.

In testing of Speaking, Galaczi (2008) investigated the effectiveness of the paired test-taker interaction in the First Certificate in English (FCE) speaking test which is a test used in most standardised examinations such as the Cambridge ESOL. The study, which served as a first step in highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the FCE paired test format, found that type of talk and test score shared a close relationship, and this provided validity evidence for the test scores. Also, learners at the lower echelons of language learning exhibit limited ability to interact with their colleagues, whereas the converse was the case for the learners at the higher level. The study filled the existing gap on the need for an FCE scoring rubric which was empirically based. In a similar study, Brooks (2009) examined the interlocution involvement of adult ESL test takers in two different oral test situations – one with a colleague test taker and the other with the examiners. It was found that significant differences existed in the output of the test takers in the two different settings/scenarios. Brooks (2009: 341) posits that, “when the test takers interacted with other students in the paired test, the interaction was much more complex and revealed the co-construction of a more linguistically demanding performance than did the interaction between examiner and students”. Brooks’s (2009) recommendation that test taker interaction should rather be used by examiners who examine speaking is in the right direction since that approach stands to reveal more aspects of test takers’ speaking competences over the scenario where they interact with their examiners. Galaczi (2014) investigated how interlocutors communicated at varying proficiency levels when they are engaged in the paired speaking test and highlighted the nuances involved in such paired interactions. Galaczi (2014) found that learners’ interactional competence is a broad concept comprising not just within-turn and between-turn topic development as observable in initiating and responding, but also turn-taking management and active listening. In their study on writing, Yunus and Chien (2016) investigated SMK Oya Pre-U students’ perceptions on Malaysian University English Test (MUET) writing. Yunus and Chien (2016) found that the majority of the test takers perceived the mind mapping strategy as positive since it helped better their writing skills. Also, it was found that mind mapping helped the test takers to better plan their writings, grasp a more holistic and in-depth comprehension of topics and be more innovative in their writings.

1.2 Competences and basic language skills tested

Competences tested is known to be one of the themes in university English language entrance examination research (Brown & Yamashita, 1995). Guest (2008), for instance, examined competences tested in Japan’s National Center Examinations for University Admissions (Senta Shiken). Another recurring theme in university English language entrance examination research is the basic language skills tested. That is, the necessity of testing all four basic language skills – Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening – is well established in the extant literature (Sawaki, Stricker & Oranje, 2008;

Powers, Kim & Weng, 2008; Liao, Qu & Morgan, 2010; Powers, 2010; Bozorgian, 2012).

Sawaki et al. (2008) found that Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening skills are distinct aspects of English language testing. Sawaki et al's (2008) finding is in consonance with what already existing studies conducted by Hale et al. (1988), Hale, Rock and Jirele (1989) and Stricker, Rock and Lee (2005) found. On their part, Liao et al. (2010) opine that although the four skills are related to a certain extent, every one of them examines unique aspects of English language competence that the other cannot examine. Bozorgian (2012) and Jinghua and Constanzo (2013) aver that Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing measure distinct aspects of the English language so much so that one cannot be substituted in a test for another. On the acquisition of the English language, evidence suggests that Listening is crucial and is intertwined with the other aspects of language such as Speaking and Reading (Manning, 1987; Hale et al., 1988; Sawaki et al., 2008).

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative study which specifically used the multiple case study design. The multiple case study is conducted when the enquirer focuses on the phenomenon and chooses multiple cases/sites to study the phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Shepard, Greene & Mc Tighe, 2003; Creswell, 2007). In its conduct, the researcher investigates the phenomenon by replicating the procedures across all the selected cases (Yin, 2003). The target population comprised: (1) the English language component of the MSEE past questions administered by the selected Ghanaian universities and (2) the WASSCE English language component past questions. The total number of universities and degree awarding institutions in Ghana is ninety-nine (99), comprising 10 comprehensive universities, 8 technical universities and 81 private universities (www.nab.gov.gh).

The multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 18 English language component of the MSEE past questions from six Ghanaian universities. The first stage of the process involved putting of the various universities into three quotas, namely: public (comprehensive 10; technical 8) and private comprehensive (81). At the second stage of the selection process, two universities were purposively selected from each of the three groups, yielding a total of six universities. For the third stage, there was a convenience selection of the English language component of the MSEE questions from each of the selected universities. Specifically, questions administered in 2016, 2017 and 2018 were selected. Also, the WASSCE English language component past questions administered in 2016, 2017 and 2018 were conveniently selected. These three past questions were selected to correspond with the years used to select the questions for the English language component of the MSEE in order to provide an even ground/basis for the benchmarking of the two sets of examinations. In order to ensure the selected universities' right to anonymity, pseudonyms (Technical University 1, Technical University 2, Comprehensive University 1, Comprehensive University 2, Private University 1 and Private University 2) were used for them throughout the study.

Document analysis was used to analyse the two types of English language entrance examinations. Document analysis involves the scrutiny of documents in order to understand the data contained in them (Rapley, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Bowen, 2009). Specifically, O'Leary's (2014) eight steps of conducting document analysis were followed in this study. Firstly, relevant texts (the past questions of the English language component of the MSEE into selected Ghanaian universities and the WASSCE English language component past questions) were gathered. Secondly, an organisation and management scheme was developed. Thirdly, copies of the original questions were made for annotation. Also, the authenticity of the questions was assessed. Thereafter, the questions' agenda and biases were explored. Then the background facts (e.g. objective, style) was explored. Questions were asked about the past examination questions in the areas of who produced them, why they were produced, when they were produced and the type of data they contained. Finally, the contents of the questions were explored.

3. Results

3.1 How the test items compare between the English language component of the MSEE and the WASSCE English language component

In order to understand the test items of the two sets of examinations, the English language component of the MSEE questions of the six selected universities were described on yearly basis (2016, 2017 and 2018) after which those of the WASSCE English language component were described using the same time period. Even though the latter examination covered aspects of *Listening*, this domain was not presented because the former examination did not test the domain. An even ground for comparison of the *Listening* test was, therefore, not existent.

3.1.1 Test item description for Technical University 1

The 2016 instrument had Sections A, B and C. The Section A contained 10 sentence-based *Subject-Verb Agreement* questions, and candidates had to select one of two options for each sentence. The Section B contained a *Reading Comprehension* passage which had four questions (three inductive and one deductive). The Section C tested Essay Writing. Two *Essay*-type questions were given to candidates to select one and answer it. Question 1 tasked test takers to write a story that illustrates the saying “Nothing good comes easily”, and Question 2 tasked candidates to write an essay to explain, at least, three causes of the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus.

The 2017 instrument had Sections A, B, C and D. Section A tested *Spelling*. Candidates were given five sentences with ten words randomly misspelled, and candidates were expected to re-write the sentences by correcting all the misspelled words. Section B was a *Summary* passage with four inductive questions. Section C contained a *Reading Comprehension* passage with four questions (one deductive and three inductive). Section D contained a single *Essay* question on the causes of road traffic accidents.

The 2018 instrument had Sections A, B, C, D and E. Section A tested the *Identification of Parts of Speech* in a 10-sentence format. Particular words, as used in context, were emboldened for candidates to identify their classes. Section B tested capitalisation of *Proper Nouns*, as used in context, in five sentences; all the proper nouns which ought to be initially capitalised were presented with initial lower-case letters and candidates tasked to rewrite the sentences by providing initial capitalisation to the proper nouns. Section C tested *Subject-Verb Agreement*. Candidates had ten sentences with two options each to select the correct answer from. Section D contained five sentences whose *Clausal Elements* were to be identified. Section E tested *Reading Comprehension* using three inductive questions and a vocabulary test based on three words used in context. For the latter, candidates were expected to provide *Synonyms* that could replace the three selected words.

3.1.2 Test item description for Technical University 2

The 2016 instrument had Sections A and B. Candidates had three *Essay*-type questions, out of which they were to select one and respond to it in Section A. Question 1 tasked candidates to write an essay to express their views on the need for all Ghanaians to practice good hygiene. Question 2 demanded that candidates write an essay to explain some possible causes of maternal mortality in Ghana. Question 3 tasked candidates to write an essay about their mother. For Section B, a *Summary* passage (narrative) with two inductive questions was presented to candidates.

A similar organisation of structure was registered for the 2017 questions. For Section A, three *Essay*-type questions were presented to candidates for them to select one and respond to it. One of these questions was argumentative. For the remaining two, one was expository whereas the other was descriptive. Section B contained a *Reading Comprehension* text with 8 questions. Out of the 8 questions, four were inductive (Questions b, c, g and h), one was deductive (Question d) and one was

on a literary device (Question e). Also, Vocabulary (Question a) and Clausal Elements (Question f) were tested.

For the 2018 edition, there were Sections A and B. Candidates were expected to select one question from Section A and answer all questions in Section B. The Section A contained three *Essay*-type questions. Question 1 tasked candidates to explain why they chose to study in Technical University 2. Question 2 tasked candidates to explain why rape victims need counselling and Question 3 demanded a description of candidates' favourite relative. Section B contained a *Reading Comprehension* passage with eight questions (a-h). Four of the questions (Questions a, c, d and e) were inductive while Question b was deductive. *Parts of Speech* (Question f), *Synonymy* (Question g) and a *Figure of Speech* (Question h) were also tested.

3.1.3 Test item description for Private University 1

The 2016 instrument for Private University 1 had Parts 1, 2 and 3. Part 1 contained three *Essay*-type questions, and candidates were expected to answer one. Question 1 demanded that candidates argue for against the position that the mass media plays an important role in shaping the opinions of the younger generation. Question 2 tasked candidates to write an essay for publication in one of the national dailies on the importance of university students dressing properly. For Question 3, candidates were tasked to discuss some of the factors that engender fire outbreaks in market centres in Ghana and also to suggest solutions to the causes. For Part 2, a *Reading Comprehension* passage was given to the candidates to read after which they were expected to provide answers to seven questions. Particularly, on the seven *Reading Comprehension* questions, whereas Question 7 tested *Synonymy*, the remaining six questions elicited inductive responses based on the text. Part 3 was subdivided into three sections (Section A, Section B and Section C). Section A tested *Punctuation*. Candidates were given a paragraph which lacked some necessary punctuations, and candidates were tasked to rewrite the paragraph by incorporating all the missing punctuation marks. As regards Section B, candidates were given five grammatically wrong sentences (*Sentence Fragments, Dangling Modifiers, Run-on Sentences* etc.), and the task was for the candidates to correct the sentences. For Section C, five *Subject-Verb Agreement* based MCQs were given to candidates to select which of the four options (a-d) that they deemed right.

For the 2017 questions, the instrument was organised into three parts (Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3). Part 1 was made up of three *Essay*-type questions, out of which candidates were to answer one. Question 1 sought candidates' views on the position that hip life (a contemporary genre of Ghanaian music that is a blend of Ghana's traditional 'highlife' and the United States of America's hip-hop) songs are not educative but are rather sexually provocative. Question 2 elicited candidates' views as to whether technology has done more harm than good. Question 3 tasked candidates to write an essay in which they discuss some possible causes of the rise of suicide cases among Ghanaian youth. Candidates were to proffer solutions to the problems discussed. Part 2 contained a *Reading Comprehension* passage with 11 questions. Questions 1-10 were MCQs with 4 options (a-d), and the responses sought were based on the text. Question 11 tested *Synonymy*, as test takers were tasked to provide words or phrases to replace a list of words (selected from the passage). Part 3, which generally tested *Structure and Usage*, was made up of Sections A, B and C. Section A tested *Punctuation*. Here, candidates were given 10 sentences which lacked the necessary punctuation marks. It was the task of candidates to rewrite the 10 sentences by providing the appropriate punctuation marks. Section B contained 5 faulty sentences (*Run-on, Wrong Verb Use and Dangling Modifiers*); candidates were expected to rewrite the sentences by producing their corrected versions. Section C tested *Subject-Verb Agreement*; five sentences with two verb options each were provided for candidates to select which of the verbs correctly fit each sentence.

The 2018 instrument for Private University 1 was divided into Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3. Part 1 contained 3 *Essay*-type questions, and candidates had to answer one out of the three questions. Question 1 demanded that candidates write an essay in which they suggest ways of controlling drug

abuse. For Question 2, candidates were tasked to discuss whether religion is an important part of human society such that every member of society has to subscribe to a particular religion. Regarding Question 3, candidates were tasked to write an essay on whether politics has done more harm than good in Ghana. The Part 2 of the instrument contained a *Reading Comprehension* passage after which there were five questions for candidates to answer. Three of those five questions were inductive (Question 1, Question 2 and Question 4). Question 5 was deductive, and Question 3 tested *Synonymy*. Pertaining to Part 3, which was on Structure and Usage, three sub-sections were identified (Section A, Section B and Section C). Specifically, Section A was made up of 5 wrong sentences (sentence fragments, lack of coordination, run-on sentences, dangling modifiers and misplaced modifiers), and candidates were tasked to provide the correct versions. Section B tested Subject-Verb Agreement. Here test takers were presented with a paragraph that contained subject-verb agreement errors; the candidates' duty was to write out the corrected versions of the paragraph. Section C tested *Punctuation*. A paragraph which lacked the necessary punctuations was presented to the examinees for them to rewrite and incorporate the necessary punctuation marks into the paragraph.

3.1.4 Test item description for Private University 2

The 2016 instrument was divided into 4 sections (Section A, Section B, Section C and Section D). The Section A was made up of 5 *Essay*-type questions. Candidates were supposed to respond to two of the questions by choosing Question 1 and selecting any one of the remaining four questions. Specifically, Question 1 demanded that candidates write a letter to the Director of Health Services in their respective communities discussing, at least, three ways of improving the quality of health care in the community. For Question 2, examinees were to write a letter to their friend stating three reasons they (candidates) decided to study at Private University 2. Regarding Question 3, candidates were to write a story ending with 'If I had known the truth, I would not have acted the way I did'. For Question 4, candidates were expected to write an article for publication in a national newspaper on the need to promote local industry in their country. Question 5 tasked candidates to describe a city that they had visited recently. Section B was a *Reading Comprehension* passage with 8 questions (a-h). Out of the 8 questions, five were inductive (Questions a, b, c, d and e), one was deductive (Question f), one tested *Clausal Elements* (Question g) and the other one tested *Synonymy*. Section C contained a *Summary* passage with a single question which candidates were expected to answer. The last Section (Section D) was divided into four parts. *Clausal Elements* (Questions 1-4), *Antonyms* (Questions 5-8) and *Usage* (Questions 9-20) were the areas tested here.

Sections A, B, C and D constituted the 2017 version. Section A had four parts. *Clausal Elements* (Questions 1-4), *Antonyms* (Questions 5-8) and *Usage* (Questions 9-20) were the areas tested. Section B was a *Reading Comprehension* test. A passage with 8 questions (a-h) was presented to candidates to answer. Five of the questions were inductive (Questions a, b, c, d and e), one was deductive (Question f), one tested *Clausal Elements* (Question g) and one tested *Synonymy*. Section C contained a *Summary* passage with a single question. The Section D was made up of 5 *Essay*-type questions. Candidates were supposed to respond to two of the questions by choosing Question 1 and selecting any one of the remaining four questions. Specifically, Question 1 demanded that candidates write a letter to the Director of Health Services in their respective communities discussing, at least, three ways of improving the quality of health care in the community. For Question 2, examinees were to write a letter to their friend stating three reasons they (candidates) decided to study at Private University 2. Regarding Question 3, candidates were to write a story ending with 'If I had known the truth, I would not have acted the way I did'. For Question 4, candidates were expected to write an article for publication in a national newspaper on the need to promote local industry in their country. Question 5 tasked candidates to describe a city that they had visited recently.

The 2018 edition was made up of four sections (Section A, Section B, Section C and Section D). Section A contained six *Essay*-type questions, and candidates were expected to answer two questions from this section (Question 1 and any other one from the remaining five). Question 1 tasked candidates to write

a letter to their Municipal Chief Executive discussing the causes of regular floods in the major cities of their country and suggesting solutions to the causes mentioned. Question 2 demanded that candidates write an article on the benefits of the free Senior High School policy in Ghana for publication in a national newspaper. For Question 3, candidates were to argue for or against the position that public universities are better than private ones. Pertaining to Question 4, candidates were asked to write a letter to their friend living abroad by explaining the importance of private universities. Regarding Question 5, examinees were to write a speech, in the capacity as newly-elected chairpersons of their community Youth Association, highlighting, at least, three causes of littering and suggesting ways of controlling them. Question 6 demanded an essay that illustrates the saying 'Look before you leap'. As regards Section B, there was a *Reading Comprehension* passage with six questions (a-g). Deductive questions (Questions a, b, c), both inductive and deductive questions (Question d), *Clausal Elements* (Question e), a *Figure of Speech* (Question f) and *Synonyms* (Question g) were presented to candidates. Section C contained a *Summary* passage with two deductive questions which tasked examinees to summarise various aspects of the test. Generally, Section D covered *Lexis and Structure. Usage* (Questions 1-15) and *Register* (Questions 16-25) were the specific areas tested in this domain.

3.1.5 Test item description for Comprehensive University 1

The 2016 instrument was divided into three sections (Section A, Section B and Section C). Section A was made up of 20 4-option (a-d) Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs). Out of those 20 questions, Questions 1-7 tested *Antonyms*, Questions 8-12 tested *Usage* while Questions 13-20 tested *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions*. Section B contained three *Essay*-type questions out of which candidates were to respond to one. Question 1 tasked candidates to write an article suitable for publication in a national newspaper on the menace of secret cults in schools. For Question 2, test takers were required to write a letter to the Headmaster of their former school discussing the positive impact of computers on education. With respect to Question 3, candidates' duty was to argue for or against the motion, "Learning about the past has no value to those of us living today". The Section C had a *Reading Comprehension* passage with eight questions. Four of the questions (Questions a, b, c and e) were inductive and one (Question g) was deductive. Also, one question tested a *Figure of Speech* (Question f), one tested *Clausal Elements* (Question g) and one other tested *Synonyms* (Question h).

The 2017 and 2018 instruments were the same. They were made up of three sections (Section A, Section B and Section C). Section A was made up of 10 MCQs with four options each (a-d) which were further sub-divided into Section I and Section II. *Synonyms* (Questions 1-5) and *Antonyms* (Questions 6-10) were the vocabulary areas tested in this domain. Section B contained four *Essay*-type questions and candidates were expected to respond to one of them. Question 1 demanded that candidates write a letter to their pen friend telling him/her three problems facing candidates' countries and suggesting solutions to the problems mentioned. For Question 2, candidates were tasked to describe a traditional marriage ceremony they had witnessed and mention two things they admired about the programme. Question 3 elicited an essay response beginning with, 'At first I thought it was a joke but...'. For Question 4, examinees were expected to write an essay in which they give account of an excursion they had made with their course mates to a place of interest in their country by describing what they saw and what they gained. Section C had one *Reading Comprehension* text with 11 questions. There were five inductive questions (Questions 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7) three deductive questions (Questions 4, 5 and 8), one question on *Clausal Elements* (Question 9), one question on *Synonyms* (Question 10) and one question on *Antonyms* (Question 11).

3.1.6 Test item description for Comprehensive University 2

The 2016 edition was set using 25 MCQs with four options (a-d) each. *Usage* (Questions 1-10), *Antonyms* (Questions 11-15), *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions* (Questions 16-20) and *Synonyms* (Questions 21-25) were the specific areas tested. The 2017 instrument was made up of 25 MCQs with

four options (a-d) each. Out of these 25 MCQs, five of them were tagged to a *Reading Comprehension* passage. There were two inductive questions (Questions 1 and 2), one *Synonymy* question (Question 3), one *Figure of Speech* question (Question 4) and one *Antonymy* question (Question 5). Additionally, candidates' competences in *Usage* (Questions 6-18), *Synonymy* (Questions 19-22) and *Antonymy* (Questions 23-25) were tested.

The 2018 instrument was made up of 25 MCQs with five options (a-e) each. Out of the 25 MCQs, six of them elicited responses related to a *Reading Comprehension* text. The questions were inductive (Questions 1, 2 and 3) and inductive (Question 6). The remaining questions tested *Synonymy* (Question 4) and a *Figure of Speech* (Question 5). Aside these six-reading comprehension-related questions, test takers' competences in *Usage* (Questions 7-12), *Synonyms* (Questions 13-17) and *Antonyms* (Questions 18-20) were tested. The other area tested was literature. In this domain, whereas questions 21-25 tested *Literary Devices*, questions 24 and 25 elicited responses for a one-stanza unseen poem.

3.2 Test item description for WASSCE English language component 2016

This instrument had both subjective and MCQ components. The subjective component had three sections (Sections A, B and C). The Section A contained five *Essay*-type questions out of which candidates had to respond to one in not more than 450 words. Question 1 tasked candidates to write a letter to their friend explaining the advantages of acquiring a skill in addition to a university degree. Question 2 tasked candidates to write an article on why corrupt practices are thriving in their country and to suggest solutions to the problems mentioned for publication in a national newspaper. Question 3 demanded that candidates write a letter to the Minister of Education stating the causes of students' poor performances in English language and suggesting some measures to improve the situation. For Question 4, candidates were to write a speech in their capacity as newly-elected chairmen of their local government area. In the speech, candidates were to highlight, at least, three problems they will deal with during their tenure. Pertaining to Question 5, test takers were tasked to write a story illustrating the saying 'don't judge a book by its cover'. Section B tested *Reading Comprehension*. A passage with eight questions (a-h) was given to candidates to read and respond to. Five of the questions were inductive (a-e), one tested *Idiomatic Expression* (f), one tested *Grammatical Name and Function* (g) and one tested *Synonymy* (h [that is, six words, as used in context were presented to candidates to provide synonyms to]). The Section C contained a *Summary* passage in which candidates had to read and answer one inductive question on.

The MCQ component contained eighty items with four options (A-D). This instrument was divided into five Sections (Sections I-VI). The Section I contained ten questions (1-10) testing candidates' competences in *Antonymy*. The Section II contained ten items (11-20) which tested *Usage*. For the Section III, ten items (21-30) were presented to candidates to test their competence in *Synonymy* while Section IV contained ten items (31-40) which tested candidates' competences in *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions*. For Section V, Candidates were tested in the use of *Registers* using a passage with ten items (41-50). Section VI contained 30 item MCQs on *Literature*. Of the 30 items, 10 tested *Prose*, 10 tested *Drama* and 10 tested *Poetry*.

3.2.1 Test item description for WASSCE English language component 2017

This instrument also had both subjective and MCQ components. The subjective component had three sections (Sections A, B and C). The Section A had five *Essay*-type questions, and candidates had to respond to one in not more than 450 words. Question 1 tasked candidates to write a letter to their truant friend's parents, informing them of their ward's negative behaviour and its consequences. Question 2 tasked candidates to write an article on the increases in crime and to suggest solutions to the problems mentioned. Question 3 demanded that candidates write a letter to their District Chief Executive, thanking him for the construction of new roads and telling him, at least, three benefits the

community stands to derive from the newly-constructed roads. For Question 4, candidates were to write a welcome address to their new Principal, in their capacity as senior prefects; candidates were to point out three areas that needed attention in their school. As regards Question 5, test takers were tasked to write a story illustrating the saying 'once bitten, twice shy'.

Section B tested *Reading Comprehension*. A passage with eight questions (a-h) was given to candidates to read and respond to. Five of the questions were inductive (a-e), one tested *Grammatical Name and Function* (f), one tested *Figure of Speech* and its meaning (g) and one tested *Synonymy* (h [specifically, six words, as used in context were presented to candidates to provide *Synonyms* to]). The Section C contained a *Summary* passage in which candidates had to read and answer two inductive questions on.

The MCQ component contained eighty items with four options (A-D). This instrument was divided into five Sections (Sections I-V). The Section I contained ten questions (1-10) testing candidates' competences in *Antonymy*. The Section II contained ten items (11-20) which tested *Usage*. For the Section III, ten items (21-30) were presented to candidates to test their competence in *Synonymy* while Section IV contained ten items (31-40) which tested candidates' competences in *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions*. For Section V, Candidates were tested in the use of *Registers* using a passage with ten items (41-50). Section VI contained 30 item MCQs on *Literature*. Of the 30 items, 10 tested *Prose*, 10 tested *Drama* and 10 tested *Poetry*.

3.2.2 Test item description for WASSCE English language component 2018

This instrument had both subjective and MCQ components. The subjective component had two sections (Sections A and B). The Section A contained five *Essay*-type questions out of which candidates had to respond to one. Question 1 tasked candidates to write a letter to their brother telling him of their post-secondary school education plans and asking for his support in that direction. Question 2 tasked candidates to write an article suitable for publication in their magazine on the dangers of disobeying school rules and regulations. Question 3 demanded that candidates write a letter to the Chairman of their school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) pointing out the need for a computer laboratory and requesting the association to build and equip one for the school. For Question 4, candidates were to argue for or against the motion 'Knowledge gained from experience is more important than knowledge gained from books.' Pertaining to Question 5, test takers were tasked to write a story illustrating the saying 'forewarned is forearmed'.

Section B tested *Reading Comprehension* and *Summary* writing. For the former, A passage with eight questions (a-h) was given to candidates to read and respond to. Five of the questions were inductive (a-e), one tested *Grammatical Name and Function* (f), one tested an *Idiom* (g) and one tested *Synonymy* (h [specifically, five words, as used in context were presented to candidates to provide *Synonyms* to]). The latter contained a *Summary* passage in which candidates had to read and answer two inductive questions on.

The MCQ component contained eighty items with four options (A-D). This instrument was divided into five Sections (Sections I-V). The Section I contained ten questions (1-10) testing candidates' competences in *Antonymy*. The Section II contained ten items (11-20) which tested *Usage*. For the Section III, ten items (21-30) were presented to candidates to test their competence in *Synonymy* while Section IV contained ten items (31-40) which tested candidates' competences in *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions*. For Section V, candidates were tested in the use of *Registers* using a passage with ten items (41-50). Section VI contained 30 item MCQs on *Literature*. Of the 30 items, 10 tested *Prose*, 10 tested *Drama* and 10 tested *Poetry*.

3.3 Basic language skills tested

This domain was purposed on ascertaining how the basic language skills (*Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking*) tested in the WASSCE English language component and the English language

component of the MSEE compare. For the presentation and analysis, the two sets of examinations were compared on yearly basis.

3.3.1 Comparison for 2016, 2017 and 2018

For 2016, not all the basic language skills were tested in the WASSCE English language examination. Reading, Writing and Listening were tested, but Speaking was not tested. Pertaining to how the various universities measured up in this domain, it was observed that all but only Comprehensive University 2 failed to test Reading in the year under consideration. For Writing, all the universities tested this basic language skill. With respect to Listening, whereas this basic language skill was tested in the WASSCE English language component, the reverse was the case for all the universities considered in this study. Pertaining to 2017, the results from Table 1 show that, out of the four basic language skills, only Reading, Writing and Listening were tested in the WASSCE English language component. For the universities, it can be observed that whereas all of them followed the pattern of the WASSCE English language component by testing Reading and Writing, the reverse was the case for Listening. With regard to 2018, only Reading, Writing and Listening were assessed in the WASSCE English language component. For the universities, it can be seen that whereas all six followed the pattern of the WASSCE English language component by testing Reading and Writing, Listening was overlooked.

Table 1: Basic Language Skill Comparison for 2016, 2017 and 2018

Basic Language Skill Comparison for 2016, 2017 AND 2018		
Basic Language Skill	WASSCE English Language Component	MSEE English Language Component
Reading	Tested	Tested
Writing	Tested	Tested
Listening	Tested	Not Tested
Speaking	Not Tested	Not Tested

3.4 Competences tested in both sets of examinations

Closely related to the basic language skills tested in the two examinations is the competencies (English language competences) tested in the examinations (Brown & Yamashita, 1995). Therefore, the competences (English language competences) tested in the WASSCE English language component were derived. After that, the competences that the English language component of the MSEE conducted by the six universities tested that were same as those tested in the WASSCE English language component were compared. This presentation and analysis are limited only to the competences tested in the WASSCE English language component for only Reading and Writing.

3.4.1 2016 Competences

As shown in Table 2, there were major differences in the competences tested in the WASSCE English language component and that of the English language component of the MSEE of the selected universities in 2016. That is, the English language component of the MSEE was silent on most of the competences tested by the WASSCE English language component. Pertaining to *Antonyms*, it was registered that only Private University 2 and Comprehensive University 1 tested this competence area. That is, the other four universities were totally silent on this competence area. For *Synonyms*, whereas Private University 1, Private University 2, Comprehensive University 1 and Comprehensive University 2 tested this competence, their counterparts from the technical universities overlooked this area.

Pertaining to *Usage*, the results further suggest that only Private University 2 and

Comprehensive University 2 tested test takers' competences in these areas. For *Registers*, none of the universities tested this domain. Regarding *Idioms* and *Idiomatic Expressions*, it is evident that three of the universities (Private University 2, Comprehensive University 1 and Comprehensive University 2) tested test takers' competences in this domain. The other three universities overlooked this domain. For *Literature*, only Comprehensive University 1 made an attempt to test test takers' skills in this domain.

With regard to *Essay Writing*, the results indicate an improvement in the number of universities that attempted to test this competence area. Technical University 1, Technical University 2, Private University 1 and Comprehensive University 1 were all noted to have tested test takers in this competence area. The pattern for *Reading* is that, out of the six universities studied, only Technical University 2 and Comprehensive University 2 failed to test this domain. Also, *Summary* received little attention in the year under consideration. That is, only Technical University 2 and Private University 2 tested this domain. Like *Literature*, only one university (Private University 2) tested test takers' competences in *Clausal Elements*, as this competence area received little attention.

Table 2: Topics (competences) for 2016 questions

WASSCE Topics (competences)	Tech. Uni. 1	Tech. Uni. 2	Private Uni. 1	Private Uni. 2	Comp. Uni. 1	Comp. Uni. 2
Antonyms				✓	✓	
Synonyms			✓	✓	✓	✓
Usage				✓		✓
Registers						
Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions				✓	✓	✓
Literature					✓	
Essay Writing	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Reading Comprehension	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Summary		✓		✓		
Clausal Elements				✓		

Furthermore, it is evident that out of the ten competences tested by WAEC in the WASSCE English language component in 2016, Private University 2 (8 competences) emerged as the university that came closest to matching the WASSCE English language component standards. This university was followed by Comprehensive University 1 (6 competences) and Comprehensive University 2 (3 competences). Unfortunately, Technical University 1 (2 competences), Technical University 2 (2 competences) and Private University 1 (2 competences) did very little in matching the competence areas tested by WAEC.

In addition, *Essay Writing* and *Comprehension* emerged as the most tested competences tested by the universities because these competences received most of the attention. On the reverse, *Literature*, *Clausal Elements* and *Registers* were the least popular competences tested by the six universities in the English language component of the MSEE.

3.4.2 2017 Competences

Not much was done by the universities to match up to the WAEC English language component standards. Evidences from Table 3 suggest that, for *Antonyms*, only three of the universities (Private University 1, Comprehensive University 1 and Comprehensive University 2) tested these competence areas. For *Synonyms*, whereas Private University 1, Private University 2, Comprehensive University 1 and Comprehensive University 2 tested this competence area, their counterparts from the technical universities did not test this competence area.

Pertaining to *Usage*, it was found that, like *Antonyms*, only three of the universities (Private University 1, Comprehensive University 1 and Comprehensive University 2) tested test takers' abilities

in this domain. *Registers* was overlooked by all the six universities. Regarding *Idioms* and *Idiomatic Expressions*, the results suggest that only two of the universities (Private University 1 and Comprehensive University 1) tested this competence area. *Literature* received scanty attention, as five of the universities disregarded this competence area.

Essay Writing and *Reading Comprehension* were found to receive the most attention by the universities. That is, *Reading Comprehension* was tested by all the universities while only one university (Comprehensive University 2) did not test *Essay Writing*. Pertaining to *Clausal Elements*, evidence suggests that not much was done in testing this competence area also; only three of the universities (Technical University 2, Private University 1 and Comprehensive University 1) tested test takers' competences in this area.

It was established that Private University 2 was the University that came closest to matching the WASSCE English language component in the competences tested. That is, out of the ten competences tested by WAEC in the WASSCE English language component in 2017, Private University 2 tested eight of those. Private University 2 was closely followed by Comprehensive University 1 (7 competences) and Comprehensive University 2 (5 competences). The three remaining universities tested only three competence areas each.

Table 3: Topics (competences) for 2017 questions

WASSCE Topics (competences)	Tech. Uni. 1	Tech. Uni. 2	Private Uni. 1	Private Uni. 2	Comp. Uni. 1	Comp. Uni. 2
Antonyms				✓	✓	✓
Synonyms			✓	✓	✓	✓
Usage				✓	✓	✓
Registers						
Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions				✓	✓	
Literature						✓
Essay Writing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Reading Comprehension	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Summary	✓			✓		
Clausal Elements		✓		✓	✓	

3.4.3 2018 Competences

The findings in Table 4 reveal that, again, major discrepancies existed between the WASSCE English language component and the English language component of the MSEE questions. The scope of the WASSCE English language component could not be matched by all the six universities. In specific terms, only three of the universities (Private University 2, Comprehensive University 1 and Comprehensive University 2) tested *Antonyms*. A similar trend was registered for *Usage*, as the same three universities tested test takers' abilities in this domain. *Registers* was found to be tested by only Private University 2 whereas *Idioms* and *Idiomatic Expressions* was equally tested by only Comprehensive University 1. The implication is that the other five universities failed to pay any attention to these two domains.

Pertaining to *Literature*, Technical University 2, Private University 2 and Comprehensive University 2 tested test takers' competences in this competence area. Their other counterparts were silent on this domain. Whilst only two of the universities tested *Summary* (Technical University 2 and Comprehensive University 2), four of the universities tested *Clausal Elements*.

Table 4: Topics (competences) for 2018 questions

WASSCE Topics (competences)	Tech. Uni. 1	Tech. Uni. 2	Private Uni. 1	Private Uni. 2	Comp. Uni. 1	Comp. Uni. 2
Antonyms				✓	✓	✓
Synonyms	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

WASSCE Topics (competences)	Tech. Uni. 1	Tech. Uni.2	Private Uni.1	Private Uni.2	Comp. Uni.1	Comp. Uni. 2
Usage				✓	✓	✓
Registers				✓		
Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions					✓	
Literature		✓		✓		✓
Essay Writing		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Reading Comprehension	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Summary		✓		✓		
Clausal Elements	✓	✓		✓	✓	

The results further suggest that *Reading Comprehension* was the most tested competence area, as all the universities tested this domain. *Registers* and *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions* received scanty attention. That is, both competences were tested only once in the English language component of the MSEE.

Private University 2 came closest to matching up to the competences tested in the WASSCE English language component (Table 4). That is, out of a total of 10 competence areas identified to be tested by WAEC in the WASSCE English language component, Private University 2 tested nine of these areas in the English language component of the MSEE. Private University 2 was closely followed by Comprehensive University 1 (7 competences), Technical University 2 (6 competences), Comprehensive University 2 (5 competences), Technical University 1 (3 competences) and Private University 1 (2 competences).

4. Discussion

The study revealed that, pertaining to structure, the two sets of examinations exhibited great variations, as the English language component of the MSEE questions largely did not follow the pattern of the WASSCE English Language component. That is, whereas the WASSCE English Language component had a consistent 80 item MCQ with four-option component and a written/subjective component with two parts, the English language component of the MSEE followed different formats as fit for the respective universities, as MCQs were used occasionally and more emphasis was placed on *Essay Writing* and *Reading Comprehension*.

The universities set the English language component MSEE questions according to their internal standards, and this caused the MSEE questions to vary even among the six universities in the area of the nature of test items and even against the WASSCE English language component. The finding that *Summary Writing*, *Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions* and *Registers*, for instance, were the WASSCE English language component areas least tested in the English language component of the MSEE is testament to this.

Considering that the English language component of the MSEE is part of an alternative examination through which some candidates gain entry into universities in Ghana, it would have been appropriate that the standards of the WASSCE English language component and the MSEE English language component with respect to the basic language skills are comparable. The present situation is, however, not ideal. As Sawaki et al. (2008) aver, *Writing, Speaking, Reading and Listening* skills are distinct aspects of English language testing. Failing to test some and not all of these skills, therefore, affect the comprehensiveness of an examination. As Bozorgian (2012) posits, each of these four skills is unique. Liao et al. (2010) add that although the four skills are related to a certain extent, every one of them tests unique aspects of English language competence that the other cannot test.

The fact that the WASSCE English language component itself – an internationally recognised examination – fails to test all the basic language skills is worrying. Considering that WASSCE is the standard examination, it is expected that it would equally be comprehensive by testing *Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing*. But evidence from this study suggests that *Speaking* is conspicuously

missing. Unlike what pertains in other internationally recognised examinations like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) where all the four basic language skills are tested to obtain comprehensive language profiles of candidates (Sawaki, Stricker & Oranje, 2008; Powers, Kim & Weng, 2008; Liao, Qu & Morgan, 2010; Bozorgian, 2012), the WASSCE English language component paints a different picture.

That the English language component of the MSEE did not match up to the WASSCE English Language component in respect of the competences tested is a challenge for the English language component of the MSEE. Considering that the WASSCE is the standard and internationally recognised examination mainly used across Anglophone West Africa to admit candidates into universities, it was expected that the English language component of the MSEE questions would measure up to the WASSCE English language component standards in order to guarantee an even ground with respect to the quality of candidates admitted into the selected universities.

5. Conclusions

The aim of the study was to benchmark the English language component of the MSEE against the mainstream WASSCE English language component. The data was made up of the past questions of the WASSCE English language component of 2016, 2017 and 2018 and the past questions of the English language component of the MSEE spanning the same period. The latter was obtained from six universities. Four major conclusions were drawn based on the findings.

Firstly, the study revealed that the English language component of the MSEE questions did not follow the regular pattern of the WASSCE English language component. That is, whereas the WASSCE English Language component had a consistent 80 item MCQ with four-option component and a written/subjective component with two parts, the English language component of the MSEE followed different formats as fit for the respective universities, as MCQs were used occasionally and more emphasis was placed on *Essay Writing* and *Reading Comprehension*.

Secondly, the English language component of the MSEE questions are not comprehensive. That is, out of the four language basic language skills necessary in determining the language profiles of test takers, only two were tested by the universities studied. This is a worrying situation since decisions on which candidates are qualified or not to enter the mainstream universities are likely to be flawed if the basic language skills tested do not cover all the four basic language skills (*Speaking, Reading, Writing, Listening*).

Thirdly, Private University 2 was the best performing university in the area of competences tested when all the six universities were compared to the WASSCE English language component. The worst performers were Technical University 1 and Private University 1. Furthermore, *Reading Comprehension* and *Essay Writing* were the most frequently tested competences in the English language component of the MSEE.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the WASSCE English language component itself is not comprehensive since it tests just three of the basic language skills (*Reading, Writing, Listening*). *Speaking*, which is an equally crucial basic language skill, is overlooked. This is a lacuna which trickles down to the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations. This notwithstanding, the coverage of the WASSCE English language component is wider/broader in comparison with the English language component of the MSEE.

6. Recommendations

In order to standardise the English language component of Mature Students' Entrance Examinations across the country as it is done for the WASSCE English language component, The Government of Ghana, through the National Council for Tertiary Education, should consider taking over the English language component of Mature Students' Entrance Examinations from the universities. That is,

instead of allowing the universities to apply their own standards which have proven to be inconsistent and grossly inadequate to the WASSCE English language component standards, an examinations body with a national character must be formed to handle the English language component of Mature Students' Entrance Examinations. This way, the expected standards will be achieved in order to improve upon decisions on admissions into universities in the country made through the English language component of Mature Students' Entrance Examinations.

Alternatively, it is recommended that the authorities of these universities consider including tasks that test the neglected language skills in the English language component of the MSEE – *Listening and Speaking*. Specifically, the Centres/Units/Departments which have the oversight duty for setting these questions should consider innovative approaches to ensuring that those skills are tested. In that regard, *Listening* tasks such as students listening to audio tapes on conversations about travel, selling and buying, visitation to the hospital, how to assemble a machine, how to carry out a process or visitation to a zoo, can be included for candidates to respond to questions set on these real life situations.

For *Speaking*, candidates should be interviewed. Group interviews with one interviewer and three interviewees, at most, is strongly recommended in order to cater for the potential large number of test takers and the possible shortfall in the number of skilled interviewees. Tasks such 'tell me about yourself', 'describe your favourite teacher or relative', 'direct me to your house', 'describe your favourite animal' or 'explain how to operate an ATM' can help assess candidates' Speaking competences. A maximum period of 30 minutes can be set for each interview session. It is until these are practised consistently that the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examination can become a good predictor of the candidates' language proficiency profile based on which decisions about whether or not to place them in the mainstream university system can be made.

Alternatively, paired test-taker interaction for *Speaking* can be modified and introduced by the universities' authorities. The modification will be equally effective because it can take care of potential large number of test takers. Also, evidence suggest that the paired test-taker interaction approach to testing *Speaking* reveals a lot of hidden competences of test takers and is thus very useful (Brooks, 2009; Galaczi, 2014). In a bid to take care of potentially large numbers, four test takers can be assigned to a session and the interaction regulated by the examiner as is done in traditional Focus Group Discussions.

In order to make the WASSCE English language component a comprehensive examination comparable to other internationally recognised examinations such as the IELTS and the TOEFL, the West African Examinations Council must, as a matter of urgency, introduce a *Speaking* component to the examinations. In doing this, candidates should be interviewed. Group interviews with one interviewer and five interviewees, at most, is strongly recommended in order to cater for the potential large number of candidates and possible shortfall in the number of expert interviewers.

Competences such as *Clausal Elements, Literature, Registers, Summary, Idioms* and *Idiomatic Expressions* that were largely overlooked by most of these universities should be given attention in order to make the English language component of Mature Students' Entrance Examinations comparable to the WASSCE English language component.

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