



Research Article

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Testing the Four Basic Language Skills in the English Language Component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations: The Case of Six Ghanaian Universities

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Abstract

This study focused on the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations (MSEE) which is a commonly used Ghanaian university placement examination. The fundamental aim was to evaluate the comprehensiveness of the English language component of the examination in the area of the four basic language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening) tested. A second objective of the study was to explore the reasons behind the choices of the basic language skills tested in the MSEE. The multiple case study design was employed for this study, and the sources of data used were responses from in-depth interviews and the past questions. The data were subjected to analysis via thematic content analysis and document analysis respectively. The analysis highlights the specific contents of the past questions and their related basic language skills tested, as well as the reasons underlying the basic language skills tested. The results revealed that only two of the basic language skills (Reading and Writing) were tested, and time limitations and logistical challenges informed lecturers' decisions not to test Speaking and Listening. The study recommends that Listening and Speaking tasks be incorporated into the examination to make it comprehensive.

Key words: Basic language skills, English language, Entrance examinations, Ghanaian Universities, Mature students

1. Introduction

A number of studies have advanced the relevance of the four basic language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening) in determining test takers' English language proficiency profiles (Sawaki, Stricker & Oranje, 2008; Powers, Kim & Weng, 2008; Liao, Qu & Morgan, 2010; Powers, 2010; Bozorgian, 2012). These studies have stressed the need for test takers to be assessed on all the four basic language skills. This way, judgements about test takers' proficiency in the English language can be much more reliable because decisions made on some and not all the four basic language skills are not reliable. For instance, Donga Ilbo (2005), Hangyeorye (2005) and Jungang Daily (2005) as cited in Powers (2010) report that internationally recognised examinations such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) test all the four basic language skills.

A major conduit within the Ghanaian university system through which some candidates seek admission is the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations (MSEE). The MSEE is administered on university-specific basis. That is, each university sets its own questions based on its own standards. For individuals to be considered eligible for the MSEE, they must be twenty-five years or older and must have prior working experience in the fields that they aspire to study. Mostly, candidates are tested in three subjects – Mathematics, English language and a General Paper. Those who pass all three subjects are admitted into the mainstream undergraduate university system.

This study evaluates the comprehensiveness of the English language component of the MSEE in the area of the four basic language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening). The reason is that despite the central role that the MSEE plays in the selection of students in Ghanaian universities, evidence from extant literature suggests that a detailed documented study on the comprehensiveness of the MSEE is scarce. Existing studies have focused on English language entrance examinations outside Ghana. In South Africa, for instance, studies such as Hernan (1995) and Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013) have both dealt with university entrance examinations practices. In addition, studies in other jurisdictions such as Japan and China (Bachman & Palmer, 1982; Brown & Christensen, 1987; Buck, 1988; Brown, 1990; Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992; Watanabe, 1992; Kunnan, 1995; O'Sullivan, 1995; Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Stapleton, 1996; Yoshida, 1996a; Kikuchi, 2006; Guest, 2008; Everson, 2009; Powers, 2010) have all concentrated on assessing English language entrance examinations into universities. What is common to all these studies is that they found weaknesses in areas such as: the components of the examinations, the skills measured by the examinations and the suitability of the examinations to the test takers. This, consequently, is a gap that demands research attention. This study is, therefore, aimed at evaluating the comprehensiveness of the English language component of the MSEE in the area of the four basic language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening). The specific research questions of the study are: (1) what are the basic language skills tested in the English language component of the MSEE and 2) which reason(s) inform the choice of those basic language skills?

The motivations for this study are threefold: Firstly, the study addresses one of the gaps that exists in access to Ghanaian higher education. Although the English language component of the MSEE has been conducted by Ghanaian universities for a considerable number of years, there is no published detailed information on the comprehensiveness of the examinations in the area of the basic language skills tested. This study makes a valuable contribution in this domain. Secondly, as the first description on the comprehensiveness of the English language component of the MSEE into the selected Ghanaian universities, the study is intended to provide a strong point for more studies on the other aspects of the examination such as the specific types of test items used and the suitability of the test items for the test takers. Finally, an insight into the comprehensiveness of the English language component of the MSEE into the selected Ghanaian universities is vital to the maximisation of the potential of the examinations because such information could be a useful indicator for the management of the universities and the lecturers involved alike to know how the examinations could be strengthened if inherent weaknesses are registered.

1.1 *The need to test all four basic language skills*

The literature suggests that there are many types of English language questions used in Examinations, and each has particular competences that it is used to assess. Researchers such as Bachman and Palmer (1982), Kunnan (1995), Davey, Lian and Higgins (2007), Everson (2009) and Powers (2010) have all conducted various investigations with the aim of coming out with answers to getting the most appropriate examination areas that can measure, comprehensively, candidates' readiness to handle higher learning tasks. The areas identified as necessary in such examinations are Speaking, Writing, Listening and Reading.

Powers (2010) opines 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 (testing all the basic language skills which constitute broader traits of communication) that the results can be regarded as reliable. That is, in order for the judgment of candidates' abilities in the English language to be fully reliable, nothing but all the four areas of English language testing should be considered. Likewise, a review of English entrance examinations was conducted on the TOEIC by Chapman and Newfields (2008). It was found that the examinations included all the four basic language skills. Also, Jinghua and Constanzo (2013) examined the relationship among TOEIC Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing skills using empirical data. Jinghua and Constanzo also examined the potential impact of Listening and Reading proficiencies on the improvement of Speaking and Writing skills. Jinghua and Constanzo found that each of the four skills measures a distinct aspect of the English language so much so that one cannot be substituted in a test for the other. Jinghua and Constanzo (p. 14) observed that:

They are moderately correlated, but the correlation is not sufficient for one skill to serve as a valid surrogate for another skill. The results are consistent with research on other English-language tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS tests. Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing each measure distinct aspects of English-language proficiency and each of them makes a unique contribution to the measurement of English-language abilities.

Jinghua and Constanzo also found that, on the acquisition of the English language, Listening is crucial and is integrated with the other components such as Speaking and Reading. Additionally, Sawaki, Stricker and Oranje (2008) investigated whether language ability is unitary or divisible into independent components. Sawaki et al. (2008) aver that "the current consensus in the field of language testing is that second language ability is multicomponential, with a general factor as well as smaller group factors" (p. 3). Sawaki et al. thus, found that Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening skills are distinct aspects of English language testing. Sawaki et al.'s finding is in consonance with what extant studies conducted by Hale, Rock and Jirele (1989) and Stricker, Rock and Lee (2005) found.

Bozorgian (2012) examined the relationship among these four skills as measured by the IELTS and concluded that each of the four skills is unique. The recommendation that all the four skills be taken into account in second language learning and evaluation is, therefore, in the right direction. Also, Liao et al. (2010) examined the correlations of the scores among the TOEIC Listening and Reading tests and the TOEIC Speaking and Writing tests to determine whether or not the tests measure four separate language skills. It was found that each skill measures distinct aspects of English language proficiency that cannot be fully assessed by the other skills. In order for candidates to fully comprehend their language proficiency profiles, Liao et al recommend that candidates should take all of the TOEIC tests (Speaking, Writing, Reading, Listening) in order to have their comprehensive language profiles. This finding is corroborated by Powers et al. (2008) who indicates that each skill contributes uniquely in the assessment of English language proficiency.

2. Research Methodology

This qualitative study specifically adopted the multiple case study design. Case study research deals with the selection of a particular problem/phenomenon and the selection of a site/context within which to study that particular problem/phenomenon in order to get an in-depth understanding of the problem/phenomenon. Creswell (2007) espouses that case study research "involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)" (p. 73). The rationale for the adoption of this design was to replicate the study processes across a number of universities in order to arrive at a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The target population comprised: (1) the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations past questions administered by the universities and (2) the lecturers who set the English language component of the MSEE questions. The past examination questions were used

because they contain the test items that were analysed. The lecturers participated in the study because their duties deal directly with the setting of the questions of their respective universities. Hence, the belief was that they could provide enough data for this study.

A total of eighteen past examination questions was used for the study. This number was considered adequate because the study focused on examining each question in more detail for its component parts in terms of the questions set and their related basic language skills tested. Five lecturers who set the English language component of the MSEE questions participated in the study. Ghana has ninety-nine universities. Eighteen are public universities (ten of them are comprehensive universities, and eight are technical universities) and eighty-one are private institutions offering degree programmes (www.nab.gov.gh). The study adopted three sampling techniques (multi stage sampling, purposive sampling and convenience sampling).

Quota sampling technique was used to select eighteen past questions from the universities. The first stage of the process involved partitioning of the various universities into three quotas, namely: public (comprehensive = 10, technical = 8) and private 81. The partitioning of the universities into quotas was to ensure that all the kinds of universities operating in Ghana were fairly represented in the study. 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. The third stage focused on the convenience selection of the past questions from each of the selected universities. Specifically, questions administered in 2016, 2017 and 2018 were selected. This was done to overcome the record-keeping challenge because older questions were rather difficult to come by. Additionally, these three years were used because of the belief that the three sets of instruments will provide enough data to fulfil the study objectives. More so, the three instruments were used for the purposes of time triangulation which, according to Brown (2005), “helps in examining the consistency of the data and interpretations over time” (p. 31).

Aside the selection of the desired number of past questions, five (one of the lecturers refused to grant the interview) English language lecturers who set the examination questions were selected purposively. The population and sample used to conduct the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Population of universities in Ghana and sample size for study

Type of University	Number of Universities	Number Selected in Each Category	Name of University	Number of Questions Selected in Each University	Total Sample
Public (Comprehensive)*	10	2	Comprehensive University 1	3	6
			Comprehensive University 2	3	
Public (Technical)*	8	2	Technical University 1	3	6
			Technical University 2	3	
Private*	81	2	Private University 1	3	6
			Private University 2	3	
Total	99	6	6	18	18

*Comprehensive university used here refers to public comprehensive university. Technical University used here refers to public technical university. Private university used here refers to private comprehensive university since virtually all the private universities operating in Ghana are comprehensive.

For the in-depth interviews, an interview guide was used to gather the data. The researcher visited the selected universities. Rapport was created between the researcher and the interviewees to ensure that the atmosphere was relaxed to engender a free flow of ideas, since the interviews were face-to-face interviews. An informed consent form and participant information sheet were given to the interviewees to offer explanations to them on the nature of the study before each interview commenced. The interviewees were required to sign the informed consent form as evidence of their assent to partake in the study. Each interview lasted approximately thirty (30) minutes. In addition, to ensure that the identities of the selected universities are hidden, pseudonyms (Comprehensive

University 1, Comprehensive University 2, Technical University 1, Technical University 2, Private University 1 and Private University 2) were used throughout the study.

Burnard's (1991) fourteen steps of conducting thematic content analysis were used to analyse the in-depth interview data. That is, notes were made on the topics discussed at the end of each interview. The written-down data were read, sifted and the overall themes written down in order to allow the researcher to fully understand the experiences of the respondents. The written-down data were re-read and many titles, as possible, were written to describe all components of the contents of the interview. Berg (1989) calls this stage 'open coding'. The lists of components were put into groups under broader titles to reduce the number of components. The regenerated lists of components and their corresponding sub-headings were read through and related titles taken out to arrive at final documents. Two other researchers were tasked to develop their own categories without having seen the final documents prepared by the researcher. The three lists (for each of the five interviews conducted) were then discussed to make the necessary adjustments in order to ensure that the categorisations were valid. The three documents (each set for one interview) were re-read along with the approved list of categories and subtitles in order to ascertain how well the categories covered all the relevant details of the interviews. Modifications were made, where necessary. Every one of the transcripts was compared with the lists of components and subtitles and 'coded' based on the lists of components' titles.

Different colourings were applied to differentiate the various categories. The differently coded sections were cut from the lists of components and put into homogeneous groups. The cut-out versions were posted on sheets and given the relevant titles and subtitles. Some of the respondents were then selected and tasked to ascertain the correctness or wrongness of the categorisation. All the sections were put together, and the original written-down data were saved in preparation of the writing up of the findings. The full writing up of the findings was done on section basis by selecting the type of data that fit each section. Finally, the data examples and the commentary were linked to literature.

For the past questions, they were picked from the libraries of the universities with the permission of the Universities' managements. O'Leary's (2014) eight steps of conducting document analysis was used to analyse the past questions. That is: 1) relevant texts (the past English language component of the MSEE questions) were gathered, 2) an organisation and management scheme was developed, 3) copies of the original questions were made for annotation, 4) the authenticity of the questions was assessed, 5) the questions' agenda and biases were explored, 6) the background information (e.g. style, purpose) was explored, 7) questions were asked about the document (e.g. who produced it? why? when? type of data?) and 8) the content of the questions were finally explored.

3. Findings

The remainder of this article highlights the basic language skills tested by the six universities. A breakdown of the questions of the six universities and the basic language skills tested are presented. The reasons cited by the lecturers for testing the identified basic language skills are then presented.

3.1 Basic language skills tested

3.1.1 Technical University 1

The 2016 instrument contained three sections (A, B and C). Section A was made up of ten Subject-Verb Agreement items, and test takers were tasked to select one of two options for every sentence. Section B was made up of a Reading Comprehension passage which was tied with four questions (three inductive and one deductive). Section C tested Essay Writing. Two essay-type questions were presented to candidates to select one. Question 1 elicited a story that illustrates, "Nothing good comes easily", whereas Question 2 elicited an essay on an explanation of, at least, three causes of the

spread of the HIV/AIDS virus. Regarding the basic language skills tested, Sections A and C tested Writing whereas Section B tested Reading.

The 2017 instrument contained four sections (A, B, C and D). Section A tested Spelling; candidates had five sentences with ten words which were arbitrarily spelled wrongly, and candidates were tasked to reproduce the sentences with all wrongly spelled words corrected. Section B contained a Summary passage which had four inductive questions. Section C tested Reading Comprehension, and the passage had four questions tied to it. For the Section D which tested Essay Writing, candidates were tasked to write an essay on the causes of road traffic accidents. Pertaining to the basic language skills tested, Section A and D tested Writing whereas Section B and Section C tested Reading.

The 2018 instrument had Sections A, B, C, D and E. The first section tested Parts of Speech using a ten-sentence format. Some words were highlighted and examinees were tasked to state those words' classes. The second section dealt with identification of Proper Nouns using five sentences; all the proper nouns which were to be initially capitalised were presented with lower-case letters, and candidates were expected to reproduce the sentences making sure the proper nouns were initially capitalised. Regarding the third section, Subject-Verb Agreement was tested; test takers were presented with ten sentences which had two options each, out of which candidates were to select the right option. For Section D, Clausal Elements was examined; candidates were presented with five sentences so that candidates identify the clausal elements contained in the sentences. For Section E, candidates were given a Reading Comprehension passage with three inductive questions and were also tasked to identify synonyms for three words used in context. As regards the basic language skills tested, Sections A, B, C and D were based on Writing whereas Section E was on Reading.

3.1.2 Technical University 2

The 2016 instrument had Sections A and B. Regarding the first section, test takers were presented with three essay-type questions, and test takers were to answer only one. Question 1 demanded that test takers write an essay on why Ghanaians need to embrace good hygienic practices. For the second question, candidates were to shed light on some factors that promote maternal mortality in Ghana. Regarding Question 3, candidates were to describe their mothers. With respect to Section B, candidates had a Summary passage which had two inductive questions tied to it. Pertaining to the basic language skills, Reading and Writing were the only skills tested; Section A was based on Writing while Section B was on Reading.

The 2017 instrument was made up of Sections A and B. For the first section, test takers were presented with three essay-type questions, and test takers were to answer only one. For the second section, candidates had a Reading Comprehension passage tied with eight questions; four of the questions were inductive (b, c, g and h), one was deductive (d) and one was on a literary device (e). Vocabulary (a) and Clausal Elements (f) were also tested in this domain. With respect to the basic language skills, Section A tested Writing, and Section B tested Reading.

The 2018 instrument had two sections (Sections A and B), and candidates were to choose a question from the first section and respond to all questions in the second section. The first section had three essay-type questions. The first question elicited reasons for test takers' decisions to study in Technical University 2. The second question elicited an explanation as to why rape victims need counselling, and the third question tasked test takers to describe their favourite relative. The Section B had a Reading Comprehension passage tied with eight tasks (a-h); four of the tasks (a, c, d and e) were inductive questions whereas Question b was deductive. Parts of Speech (f), Synonymy (g) and a Figure of Speech (h) were additionally tested. As regards the basic language skills tested, Writing was tested in Section A while Reading was tested in Section B.

3.1.3 Private University 1

The 2016 instrument for Private University 1 was made up of Parts 1, 2 and 3. Part 1 had three Essay questions; test takers were to respond to one. The first question tasked test takers to argue whether for or against the notion that the mass media performs a crucial role in shaping the ideologies of Ghana's young generation. The second question elicited candidates' opinions to be published in one of Ghana's dailies on the need for university students to dress decently. The third essay question demanded a discussion of some causative factors of fire outbreaks in Ghanaian markets and their corresponding solutions. The Part 2 contained a Reading Comprehension passage with seven questions tied to it. Specifically for the seven questions, Question 7 tested Synonymy, and the rest elicited inductive responses. The Part 3 had three sections (A, B and C). For Section A, test takers had to correct a paragraph which was largely run-on. For Section B, examinees had to correct five sentences which were a combination of sentence fragments, dangling modifiers and run-on sentences. Regarding Section C, five Subject-Verb Agreement based MCQs with four options (a-d) were presented to examinees to select the right options. With respect to the basic language skills tested, only Writing and Reading (Part 1 = Writing; Part 2 = Reading; Part 3 = Writing) were tested.

The 2017 instrument had Parts 1, 2 and 3, and Part 1 had three Essay questions; examinees had to choose one. Question 1 elicited examinees stance on whether or not hip life songs are not educative but are rather sexually provocative. Question 2 elicited candidates' views as to whether technology has done more harm than good to people. Question 3 demanded that test takers discuss some factors that engender suicide among Ghanaian youth and to suggest apposite recommendations to mitigate the causes. Part 2 was a Reading Comprehension passage tied with eleven tasks. Tasks 1-10 were multiple choice questions which had four options (a-d). Task 11 was a vocabulary test; examinees were tasked to give synonyms to selected words or phrases. Structure and Usage was examined in Part 3 which had Section A, Section B and Section C. Section A had ten sentences which had to be rewritten and properly punctuated by test takers. For Section B, examinees had to correct five sentences which were a combination of sentence fragments, dangling modifiers and run-on sentences. Regarding Section C, five Subject-Verb Agreement based MCQs with four options (a-d) were presented to examinees for them to select the right options. For the basic language skills tested, Part 1 and Part 3 tested Writing whereas Part 2 tested Reading.

Parts 1, 2 and 3 constituted the 2018 instrument. The first part had three Essay questions out of which test takers were to choose one. Question 1 sought an essay on how to control drug abuse. Pertaining to Question 2, test takers were to discuss if religion is indispensable in human society. Question 3 sought examinees' views as to whether or not politics has been beneficial to Ghana. The Part 2 had a Reading Comprehension text with five questions; Questions 1, 2 and 4 were inductive. Question 5 was deductive, and Question 3 tested Synonymy. Part 3 tested Structure and Usage, and it had Sections A, B and C. For Section A, examinees had to correct five sentences which were a combination of sentence fragments, misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers and run-on sentences. With respect to Section B, test takers were to reproduce a corrected form of a paragraph laden with Subject-Verb Agreement errors. Candidates had to reproduce a corrected version of a paragraph with poor punctuation in Section C. Regarding the basic language skills tested in this edition, it was realised that only Reading and Writing (Part 1 = Writing; Part 2 = Reading; Part 3 = Writing) were tested.

3.1.4 Private University 2

Sections A, B, C and D constituted the 2016 instrument. The first section had five essay tasks; Question 1 was compulsory, and test takers had to choose any other question from the remaining four questions. For Question 1, examinees had to write a letter to the Director of Health Services in their communities discussing three ways of improving health-care delivery. Question 2 demanded a letter to candidates' friend stating three reasons candidates opted to study at Private University 2. Question

3 demanded a story ending with, 'If I had known the truth, I would not have acted the way I did'. The fourth question elicited an article on the necessity to encourage local industries in Ghana. The fifth question demanded a description of a city candidates have visited recently. Section B had a Reading Comprehension text tied with eight questions (a-h). Five of the eight questions were inductive (a, b, c, d and e), one was deductive (f), one tested Clausal Elements (g), and one tested Synonymy. Section C had a Summary passage with one question tied to it, and Section D had four parts. Clausal Elements (1-4), Antonyms (5-8) and Usage (9-20) were tested in this domain. Reading (Section B and Section C) and Writing (Section A and Section D) were the language skills that received attention.

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 tested. Section B had a Reading Comprehension passage with 8 tasks (a-h). Tasks a, b, c, d and e were inductive, Task f was deductive, Task g tested Clausal Elements and Task h tested Synonymy. Section C contained a Summary passage tied with one task, and Section D had five Essay tasks. Question 1 was compulsory, and test takers had to choose any other Essay question from the remaining four questions. For Question 1, examinees had to write a letter to the Director of Health Services in their communities discussing three ways of improving health-care delivery. Question 2 demanded a letter to candidates' friend stating three reasons candidates opted to study at Private University 2. Question 3 elicited a story ending with, 'If I had known the truth, I would not have acted the way I did' The fourth question elicited an article on the necessity to encourage local industries in Ghana. The fifth question demanded a description of a city candidates have visited recently. Only two basic language skills were tested (Section A = Writing; Section B = Reading; Section C = Reading; Section D = Writing).

Sections A, B, C and D constituted the 2018 version. Section A had four parts. Section A had six Essay Tasks. Question 1 was compulsory, and test takers had to choose any other Essay Question from the remaining five questions. Question 1 elicited a letter to test takers' Municipal Chief Executive discussing some factors that engender regular floods in the major cities of their country while proffering apposite recommendations. Question 2 demanded an article on the pros of the free Senior High School policy in Ghana. Question 3 elicited candidates' views as to whether or not public universities are better than their private counterparts whereas, for Question 4, test takers were to compose a letter to their friend living abroad in which they explain the importance of private universities. Question 5 sought a speech in which test takers proffer, at least, three causes of littering and how to mitigate each cause. Question 6 elicited a narrative to reflect the saying, 'Look before you leap'. For Section B, candidates had a Reading Comprehension text with six questions (a-g). Deductive questions (a, b, c), both inductive and deductive questions (d), Clausal Elements (e), a Figure of Speech (f) and Synonyms (g) were the specific tasks in this domain. Section C was a Summary passage with two deductive questions. Lexis and Structure was tested in Section D; Specifically, Usage (1-15) and Register (16-25) were tested. Only two of the basic language skills (Reading [Section B and Section C] and Writing [Section A and Section D]) were tested.

3.1.5 Comprehensive University 1

The 2016 edition had Sections A, B and C. Section A had twenty four-option (a-d) MCQs; Tasks 1-7 were on Antonyms, Tasks 8-12 were on Usage while Tasks 13-20 were on Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions. Section B was made up of three essay tasks, and test takers were to select one. The first task elicited an article on the problems associated with secret cults in schools. The second task required a letter to the Headmaster of candidates' former school about the pros of computers in education. For the third task, examinees were to argue on the motion, "Learning about the past has no value to those of us living today". The Section C was a Reading Comprehension text tied with eight tasks. Tasks a, b, c and e were inductive, and Task g was deductive. Additionally, Task f tested a Figure of Speech, Task g tested Clausal Elements, and Task h tested Synonymy. Pertaining to the basic language skills tested, whereas Section A and Section B tested candidates' Writing, Section C tested Reading.

There were no differences between the 2017 and 2018 editions. Sections A, B and C made them up. Section A had ten multiple choice questions each with four options (a-d); this section was subdivided into Sections I and II. Tasks 1-5 tested Synonyms, and Tasks 6-10 tested Antonyms. Section B had four essay tasks out of which test takers had to select one. Question 1 elicited a letter to test takers' friends on problems facing Ghana and relevant solutions to the problems. Question 2 demanded an essay on an interesting traditional marriage ceremony; examinees were to mention two key interesting observations about the ceremony. Question 3 demanded an essay starting with, 'At first I thought it was a joke but...'. Regarding Question 4, test takers were to compose an essay on a trip made to an interesting location by detailing what they saw and what they learnt. Section C was a Reading Comprehension text with eleven tasks; Tasks 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 were inductive, and Tasks 4, 5 and 8 were deductive. Task 9 tested Clausal Elements, Task 10 tested Synonyms, and Task 11 tested Antonyms. For the basic English language skills tested, only Reading and Writing were tested. That is, Sections A and B tested Writing whereas Section C tested Reading.

3.1.6 Comprehensive University 2

The 2016 edition was made up of twenty-five multiple choice questions, and each had four options (a-d). Usage (1-10), Antonyms (11-15), Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions (16-20) and Synonyms (21-25) were examined. Only Writing was tested in respect of the basic language skills tested. The 2017 instrument was made up of twenty-five MCQs with four options (a-d) each. Out of these twenty-five multiple choice questions, five were tied to a Reading Comprehension text. Two inductive questions (1 and 2), one Synonymy question (3), one Figure of Speech question (4) and one Antonymy question (5) were presented to candidates to respond to. More so, Usage (6-18), Synonymy (19-22) and Antonymy (23-25) were tested. With respect to the basic English language skills tested, only Reading and Writing were covered.

The 2018 edition was made up of twenty-five multiple choice questions, and each had four options (a-d). Six of the Questions were tied to a Reading Comprehension passage; Questions 1, 2 and 3 were deductive whereas Question 6 was inductive. Synonymy (4) and a Figure of Speech (5) were also tested. Usage (7-12), Synonyms (13-17) and Antonyms (18-20) were also tested. Whereas Tasks 21-25 tested Literary Devices, Tasks 24 and 25 tested an unseen poem. Reading and Writing were the two language skills tested.

3.1.7 Interview outcome

In order to further understand the issue of the basic language skills tested in the English language component of the MSEE, five interviews were conducted. This additional data gathering approach was deemed necessary for confirmability (Guba, 1981; Pitts, 1994; Silverman, 2001; Shenton, 2004) and source triangulation (Patton, 2002; Brown, 2005) purposes. The respondents were asked to state the basic language skills they test in the MSEE.

The Lecturer of Technical University 1 mentioned:

"Reading and Writing."

For the lecturer from Technical University 2:

"I test Essay to see how they express themselves on paper. For the Reading Comprehension and Summary, I will say how they are able to understand a passage and how they are able to answer questions from it."

The response from the Lecturer of Private University 1 it was:

“Over the period, it’s been Reading and Writing...Listening and Speaking are important, but I have not thought about them yet...[laughs].”

For Private University 2, the response was that:

“We are able to test for Reading Summary and Comprehension. We also test their Writing skills. That’s a key aspect of the exams.”

The Lecturer from Comprehensive University 1 stated that:

“We test their writing skills , and then we test their Reading Comprehension skills.”

3.2 Rationale informing choices of basic language skills

Closely related to individuals’ choices are the reasons which inform such choices. The respondents were, therefore, asked to indicate the reason(s) for testing only Reading and Writing.

The Lecturer of Technical University 1 revealed that:

“We have a situation where, generally, a big cross-section of the vocational and technical community believes that people who are enrolled in professional programmes do not even need language skills, so that attitude does not even promote focusing so much on the English pronunciation and all that...here, focus is not on the language skills per se. It’s more on people’s knowledge on the professions and the programmes they are going to be enrolled in. My fear is that if we did Speaking, we may disadvantage people, so, even if we had that, I will insist on it for some programmes (Secretaryship and Management Studies and Media and Communication) and not for all programmes.”

According to the Lecturer of Technical University 2:

“I do not test Speaking and Listening because of time.”

For the Lecturer of Private University 1:

“The nature of the exam will not permit us to engage in Listening assessment because it’s the one that requires the sit and write.”

The Lecturer of Private University 2 disclosed that:

“Listening and Speaking are not major things because of time.”

For Comprehensive University 1, it was revealed that:

“We are not able to test the phonetic (Listening) skills because of their number and the lack of the gadgets that we should use in doing that. It’s also taken for granted because they assume that for a student to write this assessment, he would have gone through the Ghana education system from P1 to SHS, so having sat in the classroom to be taught using English language for about thirteen years, it is assumed that they have enough skills.”

4. Discussion

The interview results corroborate the pattern found in the past questions. That is, Reading and Writing, which are secondary basic language skills, are tested frequently in the six universities over the three-year period under consideration in this study – a trend that is very laudable. The evidence from the analysis of the past questions further suggests that Writing received the most attention. Perhaps, the emphasis may have skewed more in the favour of Writing because, as Yunus and Chien

(2016) postulate, "Writing has been widely regarded as a crucially essential skill in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) as it is a comprehensive skill that helps reinforce vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing, revising and other elements" (p.1).

However, it is crucial that Speaking and Listening are tested. This is necessary because considering that none of the four basic language skills can replace the other in determining a language learners' language proficiency (Swinston & Powers, 1980; Manning, 1987; Hale et al., 1988; Sawaki et al., 2008; Powers, Kim & Weng, 2008; Liao, Qu & Morgan, 2010; Bozorgian, 2012; Jinghua & Constanzo, 2013), the present situation casts doubt over the comprehensiveness of the examination. Again, since only two of the four basic language skills cannot paint a comprehensive picture about candidates' language profiles, decisions to admit or not to admit candidates based on the results of these questions are likely to have flaws. As Jinghua and Constanzo (2013) espouse, on the acquisition of the English language, Listening is crucial and is integrated with all the other components such as Speaking and Reading. This suggests that, of the four skills, Listening is very crucial, and that makes it necessary for it to be considered in such a crucial placement examination. Its absence, is consequently, not ideal.

Additionally, internationally recognised English language selection examinations such as TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS have Listening and Speaking as integral components. The reverse is case for the English language component of the MSEE. The latter situation corroborates the posits of Powers (2010) who reports that many universities and colleges often do not test all the important language skills, and that affects candidates' acquisition of academic literacy skills.

The finding that logistical problems, time, negative perceptions about the Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) and the general lack of will on the part of the assessors prevented them from testing Speaking and Listening was not ideal. This suggests that the required attention the examination needs from stakeholders such as successive governments, university managers and lecturers is not forthcoming. If the reverse was the case, the necessary logistics, adequate time allocation and structuring of the examination would have been provided. More so, the required training of all stakeholders of higher education in Ghana to dispel negative thoughts, especially of the TVET training would have been done to engender a much more appreciable design and administration of the examination. This would have resulted in the incorporation of Speaking and Listening into the examination to improve its comprehensiveness.

5. Conclusions

This study was purposed on evaluating the comprehensiveness of the English language component of the MSEE in the area of the four basic language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening) tested. The sources of data used were responses from in-depth interviews and the past questions. Based on the findings, four key conclusions were drawn.

Firstly, the evidence from the study indicates the English language component of MSEE is skewed towards Reading and Writing. Secondly, it is evident from the study that the English language component of the MSEE is not comprehensive. The reason is that only two of the four basic language skills (Writing and Reading) were tested. The implication of this is that the examination falls short of its expectation of unearthing candidates' comprehensive language profiles.

Thirdly, logistical problems, time constraints, negative perceptions about TVET and the general lack of will on the part of the lecturers to test Speaking and Listening were the main reasons that accounted for the testing of only Reading and Writing. Lastly, the aforementioned reasons which were cited for not testing all the four basic language skills suggests that the system's structures needed to position the English language component of MSEE properly within the Ghanaian higher education landscape is deficient.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that Ghana's Education Ministry (specifically, arms such as the Commission for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, the sub-ministry in charge of tertiary education and the managers of the universities) consider including tasks that test Listening and Speaking in the English language component of the MSEE. This can be trickled down through the organisation of language training workshops for the lecturers in order to equip them with the necessary skills that will position them to test Speaking and Writing. In that regard, Listening tasks such as students listening to audio tapes on conversations about travel, selling and buying, visitation to the hospital or visitation to a zoo can be included in the examination.

With regard to Speaking, test takers can be interviewed. Group interviews with an interviewer and three test takers is ideal in order to cater for the potential large number of test takers, the possible shortfall in the number of skilled interviewees and time constraints. Questions like 'tell me about your favourite sports personality', 'describe how your favourite food is prepared', 'describe your favourite animal', 'describe your favourite television programme' or 'explain why you have chosen the programme you want to study in this university' can help test candidates' Speaking competences.

Then again, paired test-taker interaction for testing Speaking can be modified and implemented by the lecturers. The modification will be effective because it can take care of potentially large number of test takers. Additionally, paired test-taker interaction approach to testing Speaking unearths numerous concealed competences of examinees, therefore making it very useful (Brooks, 2009; Galaczi, 2014). To cater for potentially large numbers of examinees, four of them can be assigned to a session and the interaction regulated by the examiner as practiced Focus Group Discussions.

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