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Assessing The Impact of Language Testing on The Communicative Competence of First-Year Undergraduate Students of AIFUE, Owerri, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the impact of language testing on the communicative competence of first-year undergraduate students at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education (AIFUE), Owerri, Nigeria. Anchored on Canale and Swain's (1980) theory of Communicative Competence. The study examined the extent to which language tests reflect students' real-life communicative abilities. Three research objectives and corresponding research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, with a population of 2,000 students and a sample size of 200 students selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, and the reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's Alpha, it yielded a reliability index of 0.78. Research questions were analyzed using mean and standard deviation with a criterion mean of 2.50, while responses from open-ended questions were categorized and analyzed using percentages. Findings revealed that language tests do not adequately reflect students' ability to use English in real-life conversations. The test contents primarily focus on linguistic competence rather than communicative competence. Additionally, students identified key areas of challenges affecting their communicative ability, such as confidence and anxiety, pronunciation and accent, as well as listening and comprehension difficulties. The study recommends that oral and interactive assessments be incorporated into both pre-university and university examinations. A holistic approach to language assessment should be adopted, ensuring that communicative competence is prioritized alongside linguistic competence. Furthermore, strict adherence to language curriculum implementation should be enforced by federal and state governments from primary to secondary education to enhance students' communicative abilities.

Key words: *Language, Testing, Proficiency test, Communicative and Linguistic Competence.*

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in academic success, professional development and social integration. The importance of language cannot be over-emphasized as it is central to education, in a multilingual society like Nigeria, where English serves as the official language and the medium of instruction in higher education (Bamgbose, 2000). The ability of under-graduate students to communicate effectively in English is essential for their academic performance and overall participation in university life. The transition from secondary to university education often presents linguistic challenges for students, especially those with less exposure to formal English usage and non English speaking backgrounds. To bridge this gap, universities and other educational bodies employ language proficiency tests to assess students' communicative competence upon admission. However, despite passing standardized English language tests before admission, many students still struggle with communicative competence which is the ability to use language appropriately in different social and academic contents. Communicative competence as defined by Canale and Swain (1980), encompasses grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

Language testing in Nigeria typically assesses students' grammatical knowledge, reading comprehension and writing skills, with limited focus on spoken communication and real-world language use (Adegbite, 2009). Effective language testing should therefore, evaluate not only students' grammar and vocabulary but also their ability to use language appropriately in academic and social setting. This paper assesses the role of language testing in shaping the communicative abilities of first year Nigerian undergraduates, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri in particular, assessing its impact on their academic success, and potential areas for improvement. Communicative competence refers to the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in various communication contexts. It goes beyond grammatical knowledge and accuracy to include understanding social norms, cultural context and discourse strategies. Hymes (1972) introduced the term as a response to Chomsky's (1965) concept of linguistics competence, emphasizing that language proficiency involves both knowing grammatical rules and being able to use them appropriately in real-life situations, including ethnography of speaking.

Communicative competence according to Canale and Swain (1980) looked into the concept under four key components: it includes grammatical competence, that is the knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure, and syntax. When an individual writes a well-structured essay using correct sentence formation, punctuation and grammar, the person is said to be grammatically or linguistically competent.

Furthermore, one's knowledge of the formal and informal use of language at different contexts considering the setting, purpose and participants, the individual is sociolinguistic competent because he is able to understand both the social and cultural norms of communication. Discourse competence is the ability to organize and connect ideas coherently in spoken and written communication. That is, one's knowledge of applying logical sequences and order; that is, the ability to connect sentences and ideas coherently. Strategic competence is the ability to compensate for communication gaps using gestures, paraphrasing or clarification. That is the ability to overcome communication breakdowns.

Finally, Council of Europe (2001) defines communicative competence as the ability to use linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic skills to engage in effective communication. Communicative competence cuts across different language proficiency levels, in a nutshell, communicative competence entails that one should understand the rules governing grammar and its application in real-life context considering the ethnography of speaking.

THE CONCEPT OF TEST

Language testing can be best addressed if the concept of test is understood. Anyanwu, P. & Otagburuagu, E. (2002) defined test as that measurement which is consistently accurate and also relevant. It is necessary to emphasize that a test must carry the dual quality of reliability (by measuring accurately and consistently) and only what is relevant. A test is reliable when it measures and spells out concisely in such a way that the learners can be graded on a hierarchical scale reflecting their educational abilities. According to Bachman (1991) language testing involves the systematic procedures for observing and describing learner's language behaviour under specified conditions and inferring their ability from performance. This definition emphasizes that language tests are not just about assessing knowledge but also about evaluating how well individuals can use language in different contexts. Language testing serves various purposes, including placement, diagnosis, achievement assessment, and proficiency evaluation (Alderson, Clapham & Wall, 1995).

An achievement test is a test that is usually based on the syllabus or programme of instruction, the main purpose being to ascertain the extent what has been taught in a language programme has been retained or internalized. The constant feature of every achievement test is the assumption that some programme has been transmitted through sustained and formal teaching and learning and that the learner can be summoned at any time to show the quality and quantity of learning that he has gotten, (Anyanwu and Otagburuagu, 2002). Achievement tests are probably the most widely used in the education industry and may be graded from teacher –made tests to standardized tests which test wider populations supposed to have covered approximately the same syllabus of learning. It measures how well a student has learned materials from a particular language course or curriculum.

Additionally, proficiency test measures one's ability to carry out some communicative task in the second or foreign language. The proficiency test assesses what can be done with the language in the world outside, as distinct from language class or teacher-made test. For example, candidates may be tested to investigate whether their command of English is adequate for studying in the U.S.A. or Britain. Proficiency tests assess an individual's overall language ability, regardless of any specific course or training. Examples includes, the international English language testing system (IELTS) and test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) (Bachman & Plamer,1996).

More so, diagnostic test is used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students in specific language skills. It is usually followed by a remedial programme, it helps teachers tailor instruction to individual needs.

Furthermore, aptitude test measures a persons' potential to learn a new language rather than their current knowledge. The modern language Aptitude Test (MLAT) is an example (Carroll & Sapon, 1959). Aptitude test does not have a syllabus like a proficiency test. Aptitude test is used in

discovering talents relevant to the study of the subject itself (e.g English). In language, aptitude tests are used to determine a person's competence for future work in language. That is predicting the possibility of the person's success in language studies by exploring his inherent capability and capacity to learn the subject that is being tested.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is quite imperative that the essence of language testing is to measure students' proficiency and readiness for academic communication. There is an observable gap between students' test performance and their real-life communicative competence, as many first-year undergraduates who scored well on English proficiency exams still face challenges in oral communication, discourse organization, and interaction with lecturers and friends. This disconnects raises critical questions about the effectiveness of language testing in fostering practical language skills. The importance of effective communication cannot be overemphasized for the academic engagement and professional success. It is paramount to examine the extent to which language testing influences students' ability to use English effectively in their academic and social lives as it seems that many undergraduates find it difficult to communicate proficiently in English language. In the light of this, this paper assesses the role of language testing in shaping the communicative abilities of first year Nigeria undergraduates, ALFUE, Owerri in particular.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

i. To examine the extent to which language testing in Nigerian universities assesses students' grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence;

ii. To investigate the relationship between students' performance in language test and their actual communicative competence in academic and social contexts;

iii. To identify challenges first year undergraduate students face in developing communicative competence despite passing language tests.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

i. How effectively do current language tests evaluate grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence?

ii. Is there a significant correlation between students' scores in English language tests and their ability to communicate effectively in academic and social interactions?

iii. What are the major challenges the first year students encounter in applying their tested language skills to real- life communications?

METHOD OF STUDY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 2000 first year undergraduate students of Alvan lkoku Federal University of Education, Owerri. These students just got admission through JAMB, so they recently gone through language testing and evaluation making them suitable for assessing the relationship between test performance and communicative competence. A sample size of 200 students (that is 10% of the total population) was selected using

stratified random sampling. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire comprising three sections. Section A comprised of demographic information (gender, age, faculty, self- assessed language proficiency while section B consists of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire comprises three sections with 15 items. A four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA) Agree (A) Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with the value of 4 3 2 and 1 respectively. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's Alpha and it yielded a reliability index of 0.78,

The questionnaire was administered by the researchers to the respondents and collected at the spot. The ease of the administration and collection of the questionnaire was because the respondents are the researchers' students. The research questions 1,2 and 3 were answered using mean and standard deviation with the criterion mean of 2.50. The answers elicited from the students from the open-ended question on item 15 were grouped and analyzed with percentages.

This work is anchored on the theory of communicative competence by Canale and swain (1980). Before Canale and swain's work, language competency was largely associated with grammatical knowledge (as emphasized by Noam Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence). However, Chomsky's model did not account for the ability to use language in real-life communication. Hymes (1972) introduced the idea of communicative competence, arguing that knowing a language involves more than grammar. It also includes the ability to use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts. Building on Hymes work, Canale and Swain (1980) developed a structured model that identified different components of communicative competence.

Canale and Swain's (1980) four components of communicative competence are as follows:

i. Grammatical competence: this is similar to Chomsky's linguistic competence which enables a speaker to form grammatically correct sentences. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of the linguistics system, including syntax (sentence structure) morphology (word formation) semantics (meaning) phonology (sound system) lexicon (vocabulary). However, grammatical competence on its own, does not guarantee effective communication.
ii. Sociolinguistic competence: this involves understanding how language is used in different social and cultural contexts. This deals with one's ability to use the right register and style, for example professional verses casual language; that is, an individual's ability to understand indirect speech acts, like sarcasm or politeness strategies. Sociolinguistic competence includes appropriateness of formality such as using formal versus informal language. The knowledge of how to express politeness in different cultures, which is cultural norms and values.
iii. Discourse competence: this is a component of communicative competence proposed by Canale and swain, which refers to the ability to connect sentences into coherent, meaningful discourse. Effective discourse competence allows a speaker to maintain conversation logically and understood across longer stretches of speech or writing. It involves using linking words such as however, therefore, in contrast. Also, having the knowledge of coherence which is logical sequencing of ideas in a conversation or text.
iv. Strategic competence: this is another component of communicative competence, which is the ability to use communication strategies to overcome breakdown in communication due to limited linguistic knowledge. It includes paraphrasing, using gestures, body language, and code switching. Strategic competence avails one the opportunity to communicate even when the individual lacks the right vocabulary. Canale and swain's (1980) theory of communicative

competence is relevant to this study because it focuses on how the language assessment influences student's ability to use English effectively in academic and social contexts. A well designed language tasting system should assess the four components of communicative competence rather than just focus on grammar.

v. Finally, language test that often emphasizes grammatical accuracy rather than real-life communication and skills, will make students to memorize rules rather than usage, which results in one not being able to express oneself fluently and appropriately in different contexts.

RESULTS

The results of the findings were summarized in various tables as follows:

Research Question 1: How effectively do current language tests evaluate grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence?

Table 1 showing the mean ratings of students on the influence of language test on the different components of communicative competence

Item	Statement	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Decision
1	The English language tests I took before entering the university assessed my grammar and vocabulary skills.	200	3.45	.75	Agree
2	My language test results reflected my ability to use English in real-life conversations.	200	2.05	.65	Disagree
3	The language tests I took included questions that assessed my ability to organize my thoughts in writing and speaking	200	1.94	.63	Disagree
4	I was tested on how to appropriately use language in different social situations.	200	1.78	.65	Disagree
5	My language test included strategies for handling communication difficulties such as rephrasing or using alternative expressions.	200	2.40	.59	Disagree
	Cluster mean	200	2.38	.44	Disagree

Table 1 shows that the mean rating of students in all the items, except I, are less than 2.50 bench marks mean, implying that the respondents disagree to the statements of the items while their mean rating to item I is more than 2.50 bench mark. The students agree that the English language test they took before entering the university assessed their grammar and vocabulary skills.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant correlation between students' scores in English language tests and their ability to communicate effectively in academic discussions.

Table 2 showing the mean ratings of the students to items 6, 8, 9 and 10

Item	Statement	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Decision
6	My performance in English language tests accurately represent my ability to communicate effectively in academic discussions.	200	2.17	.74	disagree
7	Despite passing my English tests, I sometimes struggle to express my thoughts clearly in class discussions.	200	2.83	.81	Agree
8	I can confidently hold conversations in English outside academic settings such as during social events or with non-Nigerian speakers.	200	2.25	.75	Disagree
9	I feel that my language test results prepared me well for writing essays, reports and academic papers.	200	2.05	.67	Disagree
10	My ability to interact in English has improved significantly since taking my university language tests.	200	1.78	.65	Disagree
	Cluster mean	200	2.38	.42	Disagree

Table 2 shows that the mean ratings of the students to items 6, 8, 9 and 10 were less than 2.50 bench mark mean for decision rule. This implies that the students disagree to the statement of the items while 7 was above the 2.50 for decision rules. It implies that the students agree that despite passing their English tests, they sometimes struggle to express their thoughts clearly in class discussions.

Research question 3: What are the major challenges that first-year students encounter in applying their tested language skills to real-life communication?

Table 3 showing the mean ratings of students on the major challenges that first year students encounter in applying their tested language skills to real-life communication.

Item	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
11	I find it difficult to understand different accents and speech patterns in university lectures and discussions.	200	2.72	.82	Agree
12	I struggle with fluency and confidence when speaking English in public settings.	200	2.69	.81	Agree
13	I often lack the right words or vocabularies while trying to express ideas in English.	200	2.66	.83	Agree
14	The teaching methods and test formats I encountered in secondary schools did not prepare me well for real-life English communication.	200	2.72	.80	Agree
	Cluster mean	200		.60	Agree

Table 3 shows the mean ratings of students on the major challenges that first year students encounter in applying their tested language skills to real-life communication. It shows that the mean ratings of students in all the items are above 2.50 benchmark mean for decision rule. It implies that all the students agreed on all the items.

Research Question 3b: What specific Challenges do you face when trying to communicate in English in academic or social settings? The students' responses were grouped as follows:

Table 4 showing specific challenges students face when trying to communicate in English in academic or social setting

S/N	Area of challenges	No of Students	Percentage
1	Pronunciation and accent	50	25%
2	Confidence and anxiety	70	35%
3	Grammar and sentence	25	12.5%
4	Listening and comprehension	30	15%
5	Academic jargon and complexity	3	1.5%
6	Use of idioms and phrasal verbs	10	5%
7	Code switching between formal and informal English.	12	6%
		200	100%

Table 4 shows specific challenges students face when trying to communicate in English in academic or social setting. 50 students out of 200 representing 25 % of the respondents identify pronunciation and accent as their specific challenge. 70 students representing 35% of the respondents identify confidence and anxiety as their challenge. Grammar and sentence were identified by 12.5% of the respondents, that is 25 students. Also, 30 students representing 15 % of the respondents identify listening and comprehension as their challenge. Academic jargon and complexity, use of idiom and phrasal verbs, code switching between formal and informal English with 1.5%, 5% and 6% of the respondents respectively, identify these as their specific challenges.

DISCUSSION

Research question one sought to find how effective current language test evaluate the different components of communicative competence. Observation of the analysis revealed that the mean ratings of students in items 2, 3, 4, and 5 are less than 2.50 bench mark mean which means that the respondents disagree to the statement;

My language test results reflected my ability to use English in real-life conversations, this is in line with (Adegbite, 2009) which asserts that language testing in Nigeria is on grammatical knowledge with limited focus on spoken communication and real-world language use. The language test that was taken included questions that assessed my ability to organize my thoughts in writing and speaking. I was tested on how to appropriately use language in different social situations. My language tests include strategies for handing communication difficulties such as rephrasing or using alternative expressions. Then item I revealed that the mean rating is more than 2.50, showing that the students agreed to the statement that the English tests they took before entering the university assessed their grammar and vocabulary skills.

The second research question was if there is a significant correlation between students score in English language tests and their ability to communicate effectively in academic discussions. Table 2 shows that the mean rating of students on item 1 is more than 2.50 bench mark. This means that the students agreed that despite passing their English tests, they sometimes struggle to express their thoughts clearly in class discussion". This is in line with Canale and Swain (1980) who emphasised that communicative competence goes beyond grammatical competence. While the mean ratings in items 6, 8, 9, and 10 is less than 2.50, showing that the students disagreed to the statements that their performance in English language tests accurately represent their ability to communicate effectively in academic discussion; that they can confidently hold conversations in English outside academic settings, that they feel that their language test results prepared them well for writing reports and academic papers, that their ability to interact in English has improved significantly since taking their university language test"

The third research question dealt with the major challenges that first year students encounter in applying their tested language skills to real-life communication. Table 3 shows that the mean ratings of students in all the items were more than 2.50, which means that they agreed to the statements, that they find it difficult to understand different accents and speech patterns in university lectures and discussions, they struggle with fluency and confidence when speaking English in public settings, they often lack the right words or expressions while trying to express ideas in English, the teaching methods and test formats they encountered in secondary school did not prepare them well for real-life English communication".

Table 4 shows the areas of specific challenges the students face when trying to communicate in English both in academic and social settings. The different areas identified were analyzed using percentage. Majority of the students numbering 70 with 35% identified confidence and anxiety as their major challenges. Pronunciation and accent occupying 25% with 50 of students identifying it as their area of challenge. Grammar and sentence 12.5% with 25 students, listening and comprehension 15% with 30 students, code-switching between formal and informal English 6% with 12 students use of idioms and phrasal verb 5% with 10 students. Finally, one can actually observe that these challenges vary from one person to another, depending on their background, exposure to English proficiency and confidence in communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Government should incorporate oral and interactive assessments of students in both pre-university and university examinations.

ii. Adopting a holistic approach to language assessment. That is, assessment of students should go beyond grammar and vocabulary to include practical communication skills.

iii. Remedial language programme should be provided for students. The programme should include activities in academic writing, public speaking and critical reading.

iv. Socioeconomic disparities of students should be addressed. Universities should offer pre-university English preparatory courses to improve the language skills of underprivileged students before being admitted into high education.

v. Both Federal and State government should as a matter of urgency through the ministry of education to ensure that school principals and proprietors adhere to the stipulated language curriculum in both primary and secondary schools.

vi. Examinations malpractices of all kinds should be fought by the all stakeholders of education so that the true abilities of the students will reflect in their language test results.

CONCLUSION

Language testing plays a pivotal role in assessing and developing the communicative competence of first year undergraduate students in Nigeria. However, current testing method often fail to capture students' true language abilities particularly in spoken and interactive communication as their admission results do not reflect their language performance. It is worthy of note to say that, as a matter of importance, a holistic approach that includes oral assessment, structured language support programmes and performance base evaluations should be adopted. This is to ensure that the students develop the necessary skills, abilities, and competences for both academic success, professional and social life communication.

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