



Challenges of Effective Skill-Specific Language Testing in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the challenges of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria, with particular attention to the assessment of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The study is based on the argument that language testing is meaningful only when assessment tasks generate valid evidence about the particular language skills they claim to measure. Adopting a conceptual and thematic review design, the paper synthesises relevant literature on test validity, communicative competence, construct alignment, examination washback, teacher assessment literacy and infrastructural constraints. The discussion shows that language testing in Nigeria is often weakened by poor alignment between intended skills, test tasks and score interpretation. Listening and speaking are especially affected by inadequate facilities, large candidate numbers, limited oral-performance assessment and overdependence on recognition-based oral items. Reading and writing, although more visible in classroom and public examinations, are also constrained by examination pressure, memorised formats, limited feedback and traditional paper-and-pencil practices. The study further identifies teacher assessment literacy, multilingual learner realities and institutional limitations as major factors affecting the quality of skill-specific assessment. It concludes that improving language testing in Nigeria requires a deliberate shift from examination-driven testing to validity-driven assessment, where each language skill is assessed through fair, appropriate and construct-aligned tasks.

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KEYWORDS:

skill-specific language testing, English language education, test validity, construct alignment, communicative competence, assessment literacy, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Language testing occupies a central place in educational decision-making because it provides evidence for judging learners' ability, progress and readiness for further learning. However, the effectiveness of a language test is not determined merely by the setting of questions, the awarding of marks or the production of examination grades. Its real value lies in the extent to which the test task represents the language ability it claims to measure. Giraldo (2020) argues that language testing should be guided by validity, since test scores become meaningful only when they support appropriate interpretations of learners' ability. In skill-specific language testing, therefore, the major concern is not simply whether learners pass or fail, but whether the test provides defensible evidence of competence in listening, speaking, reading or writing.

Skill-specific language testing is important because language ability is not a single, undivided construct. Listening, speaking, reading and writing involve different cognitive processes, performance conditions and communicative demands. Listening requires the processing of spoken input; speaking involves oral production and interaction; reading demands comprehension and interpretation of written texts; while writing requires the organisation of ideas, coherence, grammatical control, vocabulary choice and purposeful expression. Torres-Gordillo, García-Jiménez and Rodríguez-Santero (2020) maintain that the assessment of communicative competence should focus on meaningful language performance rather than isolated knowledge of language forms. This implies that a test cannot adequately assess a language skill unless its tasks reflect the actual nature of that skill.

In Nigeria, the issue of skill-specific language testing is particularly important because language test scores are often used for certification, placement, promotion and admission. English, especially, remains a major language of schooling and public examinations, and learners' performance in it can significantly influence their academic progression. Yet the Nigerian testing

context is constrained by several factors, including large class size, inadequate facilities, examination pressure, limited teacher assessment literacy, multilingual learner realities and dependence on convenient test formats. Akanbi's (2018) study on English oracy and literacy skills in Ibadan is relevant here because it draws attention to learners' achievement in the same language skills that assessment practices are expected to measure. The implication is that the concern is not only whether language skills are taught or examined, but whether they are assessed through tasks that are valid and appropriate to each skill.

Public examination practices also have a strong influence on classroom teaching and learning. Ibrahim and Bello (2020) found that the WAEC/SSCE English Test of Orals produced washback effects on teachers' methodology in senior secondary schools in Sokoto metropolis. This finding is significant because it shows that examination formats do not merely measure learning; they also shape what teachers emphasise and what learners practise. Similarly, Olaosebikan and Kolawole (2023) found that many English language teachers in Ibadan relied on traditional classroom practices and paper-and-pencil tests. Consequently, where public examinations and classroom assessments depend heavily on indirect or easily scored formats, learners may be trained to succeed in examination routines without necessarily developing balanced communicative competence.

These concerns indicate that the challenge of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria is largely a problem of construct alignment. Construct alignment concerns the relationship between the skill intended for assessment, the task used to assess it and the interpretation made from the resulting score. If the task does not represent the intended skill, the score cannot fully support the claim being made about the learner. This paper therefore examines the challenges of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria, with particular attention to test validity, communicative competence, teacher assessment literacy, examination washback, infrastructural constraints and the need for stronger alignment between language skills, assessment tasks and score interpretation.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is that language testing in Nigeria does not always provide sufficient evidence of the specific skills it claims to assess. Although listening, speaking, reading and writing are widely recognised as essential language skills, they are not always tested through tasks that reflect their actual communicative demands. This creates a validity problem because a score in a language test may be interpreted as evidence of general language competence, even when the test has measured only a limited aspect of the intended skill. As Giraldo (2020) explains, test scores require appropriate interpretation if they are to support meaningful educational decisions. The central problem, therefore, is not the absence of language testing in Nigeria, but the weak alignment between intended skills, assessment tasks and score interpretation.

This problem is especially visible in the assessment of listening and speaking. Listening requires spoken input and evidence of comprehension, while speaking requires actual oral performance. However, in many testing situations, oral language assessment is reduced to recognition-based items on sounds, stress and intonation. Ibrahim and Bello (2020) show that the WAEC/SSCE Test of Orals influenced teachers' methodology, suggesting that examination formats can shape classroom priorities. Consequently, when oral English tests emphasise recognition rather than performance, teachers and learners may focus on examinable oral features instead of developing actual listening and speaking competence. This weakens the validity of the score because success in such a test may not adequately represent oral communicative ability.

The problem also affects reading and writing. Reading assessment may become a matter of locating answers in passages rather than demonstrating deeper comprehension, inference and interpretation. In the same way, writing assessment may be reduced to memorising essay formats instead of producing coherent, purposeful and well-organised expression. Araromi and Olatunji (2019) show that writing assessment can be improved when learners participate more actively through peer assessment, suggesting that writing should involve feedback, revision and clearer judgement criteria. However, in many Nigerian classrooms, large class size, limited feedback time and examination pressure make such practices difficult to sustain. By implication, writing may be tested regularly without being assessed in a manner that fully develops or measures writing competence.

Another dimension of the problem is teacher assessment literacy. Teachers are central to classroom testing, examination preparation, feedback and the interpretation of learners' performance. Nevertheless, Ugwu and Ezeokoli (2022) found that teachers' assessment literacy affected classroom assessment practices in Nigeria. This is significant because teachers who lack strong assessment knowledge may rely on traditional, convenient or recall-based tasks that are easy to mark but weak in measuring specific language skills. Similarly, Olaosebikan and Kolawole (2023) report that many English language teachers in Ibadan rely largely on traditional approaches and paper-and-pencil tests. As a result, classroom assessment may reproduce the same construct-alignment problem observed in public examinations.

The problem of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria is therefore both conceptual and practical. It is conceptual because language skills are sometimes assessed through tasks that do not adequately represent them. It is practical because teachers, schools and examination bodies often operate under constraints such as limited facilities, large classes, inadequate professional development and examination pressure. Unless these issues are addressed, language test scores in Nigeria may continue to provide incomplete evidence of learners' actual competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing. This paper responds to that problem by examining the major challenges affecting skill-specific language testing and by proposing measures for improving its validity, fairness and effectiveness.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to examine the challenges of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper is structured to:

1. clarify the concept of skill-specific language testing as it relates to listening, speaking, reading and writing;
2. examine the relationship among communicative competence, test validity, construct alignment and skill-specific language testing;
3. identify the conceptual, pedagogical, institutional and infrastructural challenges affecting effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria;
4. discuss how public examination practices and classroom assessment habits influence the testing of specific language skills in Nigeria; and
5. suggest measures for improving the validity, fairness and effectiveness of skill-specific language testing in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the conceptual basis of skill-specific language testing?
2. How are communicative competence, test validity and construct alignment related to effective skill-specific language testing?
3. What challenges affect the effective testing of listening, speaking, reading and writing in Nigeria?
4. How do public examination practices and classroom assessment habits influence skill-specific language testing in Nigeria?
5. What measures can improve the validity, fairness and effectiveness of skill-specific language testing in Nigeria?

Conceptual Clarification

Skill-Specific Language Testing

Skill-specific language testing refers to the assessment of particular language skills through tasks designed to produce evidence about those skills. In language education, the major skills are commonly identified as listening, speaking, reading and writing. The concept is important because these skills cannot be properly measured through any convenient test format simply because the test is written in English. Giraldo (2020) argues that language testing should be judged by the appropriateness of the interpretations made from test scores. This means that a listening test should generate evidence of learners' ability to process spoken input, while a speaking test should require oral production rather than mere recognition of sounds.

The problem, however, is that language tests may carry skill-specific labels without fully measuring the intended skills. For instance, an oral English test may assess recognition of stress, vowel contrasts and intonation patterns, yet fail to assess actual oral performance. In such a case, the test provides evidence of knowledge about oral features rather than evidence of speaking competence. This becomes particularly significant in Nigeria because language test scores are used for certification, admission and progression. Consequently, if the task does not match the skill, the score may offer an incomplete or misleading picture of learners' communicative ability.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence refers to the ability to use language accurately, appropriately and meaningfully in different contexts. It includes grammatical knowledge, but it also involves listening comprehension, oral expression, reading interpretation, written communication and sensitivity to context. Torres-Gordillo, García-Jiménez and Rodríguez-Santero (2020) maintain that communicative competence assessment should focus on learners' ability to use language meaningfully, rather than their ability to recognise isolated language forms. Effective skill-specific testing must therefore assess the actual language behaviours through which communication occurs.

In Nigeria, this concept is important because language competence is often judged through high-stakes examinations. However, if such examinations rely too heavily on objective items, memorised essay formats or indirect oral tests, they may reward examination technique more than communicative ability. Akanbi's (2018) study on English oracy and literacy skills in Ibadan reinforces this concern because it focuses on learners' achievement in the skills that language education is expected to develop. By implication, effective language testing in Nigeria must go beyond general scores and consider whether learners can actually listen, speak, read and write in ways that reflect meaningful language use.

Test Validity

Test validity refers to the extent to which evidence and theory support the interpretations and uses of test scores. A test is not valid simply because it is popular, widely administered or easy to score. Its validity depends on whether the score can support the claim being made about the learner. Giraldo (2020) explains that validity in classroom language testing requires attention to curriculum objectives, test specifications, test items and the interpretation of results. Similarly, Vogt and Tsagari (2022) argue that teachers should be seen as important stakeholders in validation because they influence how assessment is understood and implemented.

In relation to skill-specific language testing in Nigeria, validity becomes central because each language skill requires a different kind of evidence. Listening cannot be adequately assessed without spoken input. Speaking cannot be fully assessed without oral performance. Reading requires comprehension and interpretation, while writing requires organisation, coherence and purposeful

expression. Therefore, when a test claims to measure a skill but uses a task that does not sufficiently represent that skill, the validity of the score becomes questionable.

Construct Alignment

Construct alignment refers to the relationship between the skill intended for assessment, the task used to assess it and the interpretation made from the score. It is the central concept in this paper because the major challenge of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria is weak alignment among these three elements. Kremmel and Harding (2020) explain that language assessment literacy involves understanding how assessment knowledge is used by different stakeholders. This suggests that teachers, examination bodies and institutions must understand not only how to test, but also how to ensure that the test task represents the intended language construct.

In practical terms, construct alignment raises direct questions. Does a listening test actually measure listening? Does a speaking test require speaking? Does a reading task assess comprehension and interpretation? Does a writing task assess coherent written expression? In Nigeria, these questions matter because examination convenience can easily replace construct accuracy. A test may be easy to administer and score, yet weak in measuring the skill it claims to assess. Construct alignment therefore provides the conceptual bridge between language-testing theory and the Nigerian realities of public examinations, classroom testing and institutional constraints.

Teacher Assessment Literacy

Teacher assessment literacy refers to the knowledge and competence teachers need to design, administer, score and interpret assessments appropriately. Pastore (2023) argues that teachers often struggle to transfer assessment theories into classroom practice, especially when they are not adequately supported through professional development. Similarly, Kremmel and Harding (2020) emphasise that assessment literacy differs across stakeholder groups because teachers, learners, administrators and test developers use assessment knowledge in different ways.

In Nigeria, teacher assessment literacy is particularly important because teachers prepare learners for both classroom tests and public examinations. Ugwu and Ezeokoli (2022) found that teachers' assessment literacy affected classroom assessment practices in Nigeria. Although their study focused on Literature-in-English teachers, its implication is relevant to language testing more broadly: weak assessment knowledge can lead to poor task design, limited feedback and questionable interpretation of learners' performance. Effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria therefore requires stronger teacher competence in validity, scoring rubrics, feedback practices and skill-appropriate assessment tasks.

Thematic Literature Review

Validity and the Problem of Score Interpretation

A major theme in the literature is that the central issue in language testing is not the score itself, but the meaning attached to it. Giraldo (2020) argues that classroom language testing should be guided by validity because test results are useful only when they support appropriate interpretations of learners' ability. This position is important because a learner's score in a language test may be treated as evidence of competence even when the test task does not fully represent the skill being claimed. Skill-specific language testing therefore requires careful attention to what the test actually measures.

In the Nigerian context, this issue is particularly significant because language test results often influence certification, placement and progression. However, if listening, speaking, reading and writing are not assessed through appropriate tasks, test scores may provide only a partial representation of learners' ability. For example, a learner may perform well in grammar and objective items but still struggle with oral communication or extended writing. Consequently, the challenge is not simply whether learners pass or fail, but whether their scores reflect the specific language abilities being assessed.

Assessment of Listening and Speaking

Listening and speaking are among the most difficult skills to assess effectively because they require performance conditions that are more demanding than written tests. Listening requires spoken input, audibility, controlled administration and tasks that show comprehension of oral language. Speaking requires oral production, interaction, trained assessors and reliable scoring criteria. Torres-Gordillo et al. (2020) argue that communicative competence assessment should focus on meaningful language performance. An oral-language test that does not require actual oral performance is therefore limited in what it can legitimately claim to measure.

In Nigeria, the challenge of assessing listening and speaking is linked to large candidate numbers, inadequate facilities, shortage of trained assessors and the pressure to use formats that are easy to administer and score. Ibrahim and Bello (2020) found that the WAEC/SSCE English Test of Orals influenced teachers' methodology in senior secondary schools in Sokoto metropolis. More importantly, their study showed that the test produced washback effects on classroom practice. This suggests that when oral English is tested indirectly, teachers may focus on preparing learners for recognition-based oral items rather than developing listening and speaking competence.

Institutional and Infrastructural Constraints

Institutional and infrastructural constraints also have a significant effect on skill-specific language testing in Nigeria. Even where teachers understand the need for valid assessment, they may be limited by large classes, inadequate equipment, poor learning environments and insufficient time. Vogt and Tsagari (2022) argue that teachers should be recognised as important stakeholders in validation because classroom realities influence the quality of assessment. This position suggests that validity is not only a theoretical concern; it is also shaped by the conditions under which tests are designed, administered and interpreted.

In Nigeria, these constraints are particularly evident in the assessment of listening and speaking. Many schools lack functional language laboratories, audio equipment and suitable spaces for oral assessment. Reading and writing assessment may also be weakened by poor access to reading materials, overcrowded classrooms and limited opportunities for detailed feedback. As a result, schools may depend on test formats that are convenient to administer but weak in measuring the intended language skills. This reinforces the central argument that skill-specific language testing in Nigeria requires not only sound assessment principles but also realistic institutional support and appropriate testing conditions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual and thematic review design. This approach is appropriate because the study examines existing scholarship, examination practices, policy-related materials and contextual issues relevant to skill-specific language testing in Nigeria. Rather than collecting numerical data from respondents, the paper develops an argument-driven synthesis of literature on language assessment, test validity, communicative competence, examination washback, teacher assessment literacy and language education in multilingual contexts.

The analysis is organised thematically around the major issues affecting skill-specific language testing. These include construct alignment, the testing of listening and speaking, the testing of reading and writing, public examination washback, teacher assessment literacy, multilingual learner realities and infrastructural limitations. This method makes it possible to connect conceptual debates in language assessment with the practical challenges of assessing specific language skills in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF THEMATIC FINDINGS

The thematic review shows that the major challenge of skill-specific language testing in Nigeria is weak construct alignment. Although listening, speaking, reading and writing are recognised as important language skills, they are not always assessed through tasks that adequately reflect their actual demands. Giraldo (2020) argues that language test scores are meaningful only when they support appropriate interpretations of learners' ability. Therefore, when a test score is used to make claims about a specific language skill, the task must generate evidence that is directly related to that skill.

One major finding is that listening and speaking remain the most vulnerable skills in Nigerian language testing. This is because they require facilities, trained assessors, manageable candidate numbers and reliable scoring procedures. Ibrahim and Bello (2020) show that the WAEC/SSCE Test of Orals influenced teachers' methodology, suggesting that public examination formats can shape classroom practice. However, where oral English assessment depends mainly on recognition-based items, it may measure knowledge of oral features rather than actual listening and speaking competence. Consequently, learners may perform well in oral English tests without necessarily demonstrating adequate oral communicative ability.

The review also shows that reading and writing are more visible in language examinations, but they are not free from validity problems. Reading assessment may be reduced to locating answers in passages, while writing may become a matter of reproducing memorised formats. Araromi and Olatunji (2019) suggest that writing assessment can be improved through more participatory practices such as peer assessment. This implies that writing assessment in Nigeria should not be limited to final-product scoring. It should also include feedback, revision and clearer criteria for judging content, organisation, coherence and expression.

Another important finding concerns teacher assessment literacy. Ugwu and Ezeokoli (2022) show that teachers' assessment knowledge affects classroom assessment practices in Nigeria. Similarly, Olaosebikan and Kolawole (2023) report that many English language teachers in Ibadan rely on traditional approaches and paper-and-pencil tests. This is significant because teachers are central to the implementation of skill-specific assessment. Where teachers lack adequate assessment literacy, they may design tests that are convenient to administer but weak in diagnosing learners' actual listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities.

The review further reveals that institutional and infrastructural constraints limit the quality of skill-specific testing in Nigeria. Large class size, inadequate audio facilities, shortage of trained assessors, poor access to reading materials and limited time for writing feedback all affect assessment practice. However, these constraints should not be used to justify weak testing practices. Rather, they show why language testing in Nigeria must be planned around validity, fairness and feasibility. Taken together, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of skill-specific language testing in Nigeria depends on stronger alignment among curriculum aims, classroom instruction, assessment tasks and score interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the challenges of effective skill-specific language testing in Nigeria. The discussion shows that the central difficulty is not the mere absence of language tests, but the weak alignment between the language skills intended for assessment, the tasks used in testing and the interpretation of learners' scores. Listening, speaking, reading and writing require different forms of evidence. Therefore, a test that does not reflect the actual demands of a skill cannot fully support valid judgement of learners' competence.

The study also establishes that skill-specific language testing in Nigeria is constrained by examination washback, limited teacher assessment literacy, inadequate facilities, large class size, multilingual learner realities and overdependence on administratively convenient test formats. These challenges suggest that language scores may sometimes reflect examination familiarity more than actual communicative competence. Consequently, improving skill-specific language testing in Nigeria requires a deliberate shift from examination-driven testing to validity-driven assessment, where each language skill is assessed through fair, appropriate and construct-aligned tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Language tests in Nigeria should be designed to reflect the specific skill being assessed, so that listening, speaking, reading and writing are not measured through tasks that misrepresent their actual communicative demands.

1. Examination bodies should strengthen the assessment of listening and speaking by reducing overdependence on recognition-based oral items and introducing more appropriate ways of assessing oral performance and listening comprehension.
2. Teachers should receive continuous training in language assessment literacy, especially in test validity, task design, scoring rubrics, feedback practices and interpretation of learners' performance.
3. Schools and examination centres should be better equipped with audio materials, functional language laboratories, suitable spaces for oral assessment, reading resources and manageable arrangements for writing feedback.
4. Classroom assessment should move beyond examination rehearsal by including oral presentations, listening tasks, reading activities, essay drafting, peer review and formative feedback.
5. Public examination practices should be reviewed to promote positive washback, so that what is tested encourages meaningful teaching and learning of specific language skills.
6. Curriculum planners, teachers and examination bodies should ensure stronger alignment between curriculum objectives, classroom instruction, assessment tasks and score interpretation.
7. Further research should examine how specific language skills are currently assessed across different levels of education in Nigeria, with attention to the validity, fairness and practical limitations of existing testing practices.

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