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## **An Evaluation of the "Use Of English" Examination Questions at the University of Ilorin: A Pilot Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Given the crucial import of the English language in the educational system of Nigeria, especially at the university level, this paper reported the evaluation of the quality of the "Use of English" (GNS111 and GNS 112) questions of the University of Ilorin. A twelve-point instrument of evaluation is used to measure the examination questions of two sessions (2001/2002 and 2002/2003) and they are found to be satisfactory though with rooms for further improvement and enhanced quality at the levels of validity and reliability. As a pilot study that is intended to precede a subsequent evaluation of recent data, engendered by the adoption of the Computer-based Testing (CBT) in the University, the study is a preliminary investigation. Recommendations that border on better content validity or curriculum coverage in the examinations, improved curriculum, incorporation of practical skills of listening and speaking as part of examinations, allowing students to learn from their own errors and weaknesses in examinations, etc. were given, with a view to achieving more qualitative examination questions.

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## Introduction

The University of Ilorin is one of the seven Higher Institutions of learning established by a decree of the Federal Military government in August 1975. The objective, as stated in the Third National Development Plan, was to provide more opportunities for the increasing university education needs of Nigerians and to contribute to the training of the high level manpower that a rapidly-expanding economy like Nigeria required.

The University started as an affiliated college of the University of Ibadan. It attained its full autonomous status on October 1, 1977. From a modest background of three faculties having two hundred students at inception, the University has grown tremendously first from eight faculties a decade ago to fifteen Faculties in 2014, a student population of over forty thousand. The staff strength has also increased to almost four thousand as against the pioneering Administration of two administrative officers, one clerk typist and a driver (Aliagan, 2002: 5).

From the embers of the of what is referred to as “the Formation Stage (1976-1982), the Consolidation Stage (1982-1992), the Actualisation Stage (1992-2002) and the Transformation Stage (2002 till 2012)” (Adedimeji, 2010), the University has successfully begun what can be referred to as the Innovation Stage (2012 – date) during which the number of Faculties further grew from twelve to 15, making it one of the fastest growing Nigerian universities. The Faculties of the University now are those of Agriculture, Arts, Basic Medical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Communication and Information Sciences, Education, Engineering and Technology, Environmental Sciences, Law, Life Sciences, Management Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Physical Sciences, Social Sciences and Veterinary Medicine. There are also the General Studies Division as well as many Centres, Institutes and Schools.

The General Studies Division, part of whose objectives is to improve the language and communication skills of all students and to help them develop adequate competence in the Use of English Language as a tool for their present studies and future employments, engages the services of English Language specialists and experts in teaching two of



its five courses: Use of English I and II (or GNS 111 and GNS 112) (University of Ilorin, 2009-2013; Adedimeji, 2013). At the end of every semester, limited response essay test items were administered on the students till the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century from which the data for this study were sourced. The courses are compulsory for fresh university students. The lecturers of Department of English, (formerly Modern European Languages) especially those specialising in English language, are always involved in the coordination, teaching and administration of Use of English programme. The teachers assessed the students' performance and awarded scores.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which the Use of English examinations achieved the desired purpose of evaluating and summatively determining the teaching learning process of the course at point in the recent past few years before the introduction of the Computer-based Testing for the "Use of English".

The study is aimed at identifying the patterns and quality of the Use of English questions, as a component of the academic development of the University, before the introduction of CBT. It will therefore serve as the basis of a future study of the evaluation of the current CBT model. Based on the findings, the study is ultimately intended to suggest ways of improving the quality of language testing in the University of Ilorin in particular and the Nigerian university system in general while giving recommendations towards achieving better academic performance in the Use of English programme.

### **Research Methodology**

Being a descriptive research, the case study approach is adopted by assessing the degree of appropriateness of the Use of English courses for 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 sessions. The sampling of the questions from the pools of the data available was random. Ultimately, four questions, covering two sessions are used as our case study and they are evaluated chiefly based on instruments relating to the twin parameters of validity



and reliability, which are key characteristics of language testing. A 12-point instrument is developed from a number of elements to evaluate the quality of the four data selected which cover the First and Second Semester examinations of two academic sessions.

### **Conceptualising Evaluation**

Evaluation is a natural corollary of teaching. As an applied linguistic discipline, which concerns the application of the principles, insights and findings from pure linguistics (i.e. descriptive and theoretical linguistics) to solve language-related problems in the areas of education, commerce, science and other fields of human endeavour (Ayodabo, 2007; Adedimeji, 2011), language teaching is essentially cultivating the knowledge of language in learners. Teaching a language is largely a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary activity which includes organisational dimension, technological dimension, psychological dimension, sociological dimension, pedagogical dimension and indeed, linguistic dimension (Obi-Okoye, 2001). After language teaching, there is often language testing and testing itself is associated with assessment, evaluation, measurement, etc.

Experts in curriculum planning have always underscored the pivotal role of evaluation in any education programme (Lewy, 1997; Wheeler, 1998; Yoloye, 1998; Okebukola, 2003; Babatunde, 2012). It is evident from their submissions that evaluation, there will be no parameter of measuring the successes or failures and the strengths or weaknesses the teaching learning process.

Okebukola (2003) defines evaluation as any “process that is designed to provide information that will help us making a judgment about a given situation”. To Azikiwe (1998), evaluation “involves gathering and analyzing information and decision making based on the outcome of the analysis”. Evaluation is either formative or summative with the underlining purpose of accountability and improvement for services or performance. The scope of evaluation operates at two discrete levels: micro and macro (Yoloye, 1998).

Essentially, the main objective of evaluation is to determine how much the learners have imbibed. Other global objectives of evaluation,



especially in relation to the pedagogy of English as a second language in the Nigerian context, are: determining the quantity and quality of the language students have learned; identifying the strengths and weakness of the students, assessing test items and the language curriculum; determining the effectiveness of the teachers, the methodology and instructional materials used; providing bases for grading and promoting students; and guiding the university or school administration in the modification or change of the programme (Azikiwe, 1998).

In teaching and evaluating any language programme, there must be cooperation among the members of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) triangle. Adedimeji (1999) provides the Use of English *core* triangle with Material (M) at the left, the Teacher (T) at the apex and the Learner (L) at the right. He contends that there is a direct relationship between M and T on the one hand and T and L on the other. He maintains that the mid-way between good materials and functional learning is effective teaching while testing or evaluation directly derives from teaching. He also identifies the *cover* triangle, consisting of the parents, the University Administrators and Governments who all have critical roles to play in addressing the problems of the Use of English learning and making the programme attain its prospects and potential (Adedimeji, 2013).

### Approach and Analysis

Given the scope of the present research, what will be evaluated are the examination questions or tests. In testing, for evaluation to be functional, it is expected to cover the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain of learning. Under the cognitive domain, the test should focus on new vocabulary, grammar, rules of syntax and norms of usage that learners have acquired. For the affective domain, the test must cover the learners' desire to communicate, the love to read all written materials and the appreciation at the aesthetic values inherent in such written materials. The test for psychomotor domain of learning should encompass proper pronunciation in the second language i.e. English (Azikiwe, 1998; Okebukola, 2003).

In other words, testing in English should cover process skills and



practical skills all of which constitute the whole gamut of language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These areas are borne in mind in undertaking the evaluation. The identified elements in the instrument are graded on a six-point scale of 0 – 5 from the lowest to highest quality and values are awarded on the basis.

### Summary of Evaluation of GNS 111 Questions of the University of Ilorin

#### (a) GNS 111, 2001/2002 Session

No	Elements	0	1	2	3	4	5
1	Attempting all questions						
2	Questions on study skills	✓					
3	Questions on vocabulary development and Dictionary Usage						✓
4	Questions on Grammar			✓			
5	Questions on reading skills					✓	
6	Appropriate wording of questions						✓
7	Testing practical skills	✓					
8	Testing summary skills					✓	
9	Testing comprehension skills						✓
10	Asking specific and focused questions					✓	
11	Development of marking scheme					✓	
12	Letting students know the weight of questions	✓					✓

**TOTAL**

**38/60**

Percentage score of validity and reliability

**63.3%**

### Evaluation of GNS 111 questions of University of Ilorin

#### (b) GNS 111 (2002/2003 session)

No.	Elements	0	1	2	3	4	5
1	Attempting all questions						✓
2	Questions on study skills		✓				
3	Questions on vocabulary development and Dictionary Usage					✓	
4	Questions on Grammar			✓			
5	Questions on reading skills		✓				
6	Appropriate wording of questions					✓	
7	Testing practical skills	✓					
8	Testing summary skills					✓	
9	Testing comprehension skills						✓
10	Asking specific and focused questions						



11	Development of marking scheme						
12	Letting students known the weight of questions	✓					

**TOTAL****34/60**

Percentage score of validity and reliability

**56.7%**

### Evaluation of GNS 112 Examination Question of the University of Ilorin

A bar chart of the result is presented as follows:

#### (c) GNS 112 2001/2002 session

No.	Elements	0	1	2	3	4	5
1	Attempting all questions						✓
2	Questions on study skills		✓				
3	Questions on vocabulary development and Dictionary Usage			✓			
4	Questions on Grammar	✓					
5	Questions on reading skills	✓					
6	Appropriate wording of questions						✓
7	Testing practical skills					✓	
8	Testing summary skills					✓	
9	Testing comprehension skills			✓			
10	Asking specific and focused questions					✓	
11	Development of marking scheme						✓
12	Letting students known the weight of questions	✓					

**TOTAL****32/60**

Percentage score of validity and reliability

**53%**

### Evaluation of GNS 112 Examination Questions of the University of Ilorin

It is obvious from the foregoing that the quality of the Use of English

Examination of the University of Ilorin can be

#### (d) GNS 112 2002/2003 session

No.	Elements	0	1	2	3	4	5
1	Attempting all questions						✓
2	Questions on study skills			✓			
3	Questions on vocabulary development and Dictionary Usage		✓				
4	Questions on Grammar	✓					
5	Questions on reading skills	✓					
6	Appropriate wording of questions						✓
7	Testing practical skills					✓	



8	Testing summary skills						
9	Testing comprehension skills						
10	Asking specific and focused questions						
11	Development of marking scheme						
12	Letting students known the weight of questions						

**TOTAL****41/60**

Percentage score of validity and reliability

**68%**

A bar chart of the result is presented as follows:

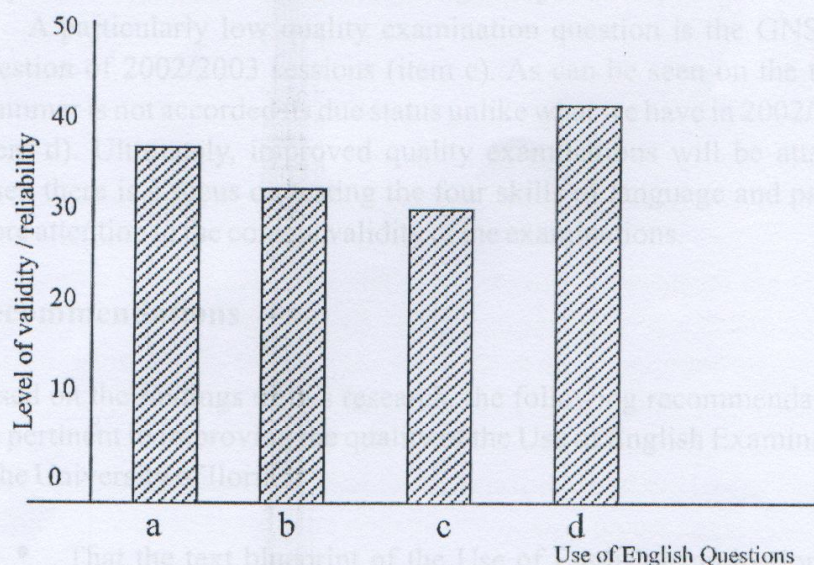


Fig. 2. Levels of GNS Examination Questions Validity and Reliability

### Discussion of Result

It is obvious from the foregoing that the quality of the Use of English (GNS 111 and GNS 112) Examination of the University of Ilorin can be improved upon. The cumulative percentage score of the validity and reliability of such is 60.3%. Despite this good rating, there is a lack of curriculum coverage. This may be due to the absence of Test Blue-Print or Table of Test Specification. Though the importance of teaching and evaluating all the four skills of language is emphasised in literature, only the two skills of literacy, reading and writing, are evaluated with the skills of oracy, i.e. listening and speaking, discountenanced. The



implication of this is that students will end up as bad speakers of English since they are not evaluated or well taught in that primary skill. According to MacCarthy (1967:107), "to neglect the manner of speaking a language, its pronunciation, that is- can only produce a lop-sided course of language study. As lop-sided as it one was to neglect its spelling or its grammar."

The result of this lies in graduates with low level at proficiency in speaking unaffected English. The tendency is also strong that they may not be able to decode the native English speaker's speech.

A particularly low quality examination question is the GNS 112 question of 2002/2003 sessions (item c). As can be seen on the table, grammar is not accorded its due status unlike what we have in 2002/2003 (item d). Ultimately, improved quality examinations will be attained when there is a focus on testing the four skills of language and paying more attention to the content validity of the examinations.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are pertinent to improving the quality of the Use of English Examination at the University of Ilorin:

- That the text blueprint of the Use of English examinations be always developed with a view to achieving content validity.
- That listening and speaking skills acquired by students be more vigorously taught and evaluated.
- That such listening and speaking skills should be among the first topics to be taught rather than being the last in the course curriculum because of their primary status.
- That MCQs in their varieties be adopted because of their merits in evaluating especially large classes that the Use of English classes are always.
- That students be given the opportunity of knowing their weakness in the examinations and tests so that they may learn better. This can be achieved by returning students' scripts to them, even if temporarily.



- That examination questions be accompanied by the point-value or weight each of them is worth always.

## Conclusion

The University of Ilorin has undergone significant developments in academic, infrastructural, administrative and physical domains in the last fifteen years such that in 2014 and 2015, it emerged as the most preferred University by admission applicants in Nigeria with over 105,000 applicants. The University is also ranked in July 2014 by For International Colleges and Universities ([www.4icu.org](http://www.4icu.org)) as the best University in Nigeria, the 20<sup>th</sup> in Africa and the 1,842<sup>nd</sup> in the world. The success of the university is a function of the quality of education it provides and the integrity of its academic values including the conduct of examinations.

An attempt has been made in this study to evaluate the Use of English (GNS 111 and GNS 112) examination questions of the University of Ilorin within two sessions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century before the University attained its present status. The quality of the questions is assessed based on a number of parameters pertaining to course contents and examination items. It is found that the Use of English questions are good as they are with 60.3% quality on the aggregate. This standard, it is fore grounded, can be improved upon especially with the insights and enlightenment provided by recent developments in curriculum development, language teaching, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Computer-Assisted Language Instruction (CALI) and Computer-based Testing (CBT) all of which had not taken firm roots in the University during the period of this study.

Moreover, as examinations are just a part of pedagogy, a means to an end rather than ends in themselves, it is hereby submitted that motivating the Use of English teachers to be more committed in discharging their duties, improving the curriculum to be more encyclopedic and result-oriented with appropriate materials are germane to improved language education in our universities. Also, encouraging the students, in all ramifications, to see the Use of English programme as an asset, an intellectual desideratum that it is, rather than a mere



academic drudgery, a liability of sort, warranting the attention enough for the lowest pass mark (i.e. 40% or E grade or “Let My people Go”) is very important.

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