

## ORAL PRODUCTION ASSESSMENT AMONG LEARNERS OF FRENCH IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN GHANA: THE CASE OF WASSCE FRENCH EXAMINATION

**Seth Kosi Emmanuel AFARI**

University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana  
[safari@uds.edu.gh](mailto:safari@uds.edu.gh)

**Caroline Akpene Aku YEGBLEMENAWO**

University of Professional Studies Accra, Ghana,  
[caroline.yegblemenawo@upsamail.edu.gh](mailto:caroline.yegblemenawo@upsamail.edu.gh)

&

**Edem Kwasi BAKAH**

University of Cape Coast, Ghana  
[ebakah@ucc.edu.gh](mailto:ebakah@ucc.edu.gh)

**Abstract:** This study examines the structure and conduct of the Oral production component of WASSCE French examination. The study intends to ascertain the extent to which Oral production assessment examination engenders development of oral competencies among learners of French. Interview data were obtained from students and examiners. The findings show that students lack spontaneity, fluency and understanding of questions. The study confirms that the production component of WASSCE Oral French has an impact on the development of learners' oral communicative skills. Though the test structure was adequate for assessing the candidates' oral skills, the results reveal that the examination is conducted under inappropriate conditions namely the possibility of schools having foreknowledge of the paper, overstressing of examiners, insufficient time and examiners for the test administration, subjectivity on the part of the examiners in assessing the candidates and anxiety on the part of the candidates. The study therefore recommends that Oral production examination be introduced from the first year of SHS. The study also recommends the conduct of pre-examination coordination with dummy questions, inclusion of group performance in the test, recruitment of more examiners, extension of the duration of the examination, allotting more marks for orals production tests than the written ones and adoption of methods suitable for teaching orals in the Ghanaian context.

**Keywords :** Communication skills, Language testing, Oral production, Summative Assessment.

### ÉVALUATION DE LA PRODUCTION ORALE CHEZ LES APPRENANTS DE FRANÇAIS DANS LES SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS AU GHANA : LE CAS DE L'EXAMEN DE FRANÇAIS DU WASSCE

**Résumé :** Cette étude porte sur la structure et la conduite de la composante de production orale de l'examen de français du WASSCE afin de déterminer dans quelle mesure elle engendre le développement de compétences orales chez les apprenants de français. Des données d'entretiens ont été obtenues auprès d'étudiants et d'examineurs. Les résultats montrent que les étudiants manquent de spontanéité, de fluidité et de compréhension des questions. L'étude confirme que la composante production du WASSCE Oral French a un impact sur le développement des

compétences de communication orale des apprenants. Bien que la structure du test soit adéquate pour évaluer les compétences orales des candidats, les résultats révèlent que l'examen se déroule dans des conditions inappropriées, à savoir la possibilité pour les écoles d'avoir une connaissance préalable de l'épreuve, la surcharge de travail des examinateurs, le manque de temps et d'examineurs pour l'administration du test, la subjectivité des examinateurs dans l'évaluation des candidats et l'anxiété des candidats. L'étude recommande donc que l'examen de production orale soit introduit dès la première année de SHS. L'étude recommande également la conduite d'une coordination pré-examen avec des questions fictives, l'inclusion de la performance de groupe dans le test, le recrutement d'un plus grand nombre d'examineurs, l'extension de la durée de l'examen, l'attribution de plus de points pour les tests de production orale que pour les tests écrits et l'adoption de méthodes adaptées à l'enseignement des oraux dans le contexte ghanéen.

**Mots-clés** : Aptitudes à la communication, Test linguistique, Production orale, Évaluation sommative.

## Introduction

Communicating effectively is necessary in every human situation. To ensure that its citizens are able to communicate effectively with its francophone neighbours and the world at large (Nimako, 2014), Ghana adopted the French language as a foreign language to be learnt at various levels of the educational ladder (Agbefle, 2014). DeMeo (2016) attests to the comparative advantage in being bilingual when one is travelling across the world. According to the Ministry of Education, the teaching of French seeks to basically to simplify the learning process so as to promote effective communication among students of French in day-to-day activities and in one's professional life orally and in writing. (MOE, 2010, p. ii). At the end of the French course, learners are expected to communicate effectively in basic French with confidence. An initial survey conducted by us at the beginning of this present study to ascertain the level of the communicative competence of some tertiary students who had good grades (grades A1 to C6 being the required grades for entry into Universities in Ghana) at the SHS level and are currently studying French at the tertiary level, reveals that, many of the students who took part in the survey demonstrated an appreciably good mastery of the written aspect of the language right from the onset of their programmes. The same, however, cannot be said about their ability to communicate orally in the same language. This lacuna of ineffective oral French communication by graduates of Senior High Schools in Ghana could be probed in many perspectives. This study however intends to investigate how far the West African Examination Council (WAEC)'s test structure and mode of assessment contribute to the development of the desired oral production skills in French.

Some previous studies on oral communication investigated the attitude and perception of students towards the practising of oral skills in the language classroom (Fahad, 2011; Nazara, 2011; Lee, 2009; Xia, 2009). These studies reveal the unwillingness of students to practise their speaking skills. Kuupole et al. (2009) in a study focused on learners' appraisal of their oral and written competence. It was revealed that speaking was rated second as an area posing major problems for students after listening comprehension. Though all participants had pre-university knowledge of the French language, a substantial number of respondents said their spoken French was poor. In another study, Kuupole (2012) investigates the assessment of oral production in French in the Colleges of Education in

Ghana with focus on the role of the assessor. She observes that due to the artificial nature of oral assessment, the most difficult aspect of assessing Oral French is the difficulty most trainees have in sustaining a free-flow conversation within the framework imposed by the method of assessment. The results reveal that assessors sometimes fail in their role as facilitators of discourse and therefore could not obtain the precious and indispensable oral production from the assessed.

Nguyen and Le (2012) also shows that language tests do not always measure learners' ability to communicate in the target language because they do not test students' creative application of language knowledge to communication. The studies cited and many others do not suggest ways to make the test more oriented to examining the actual language proficiency and performance of the students to make the test more reliable. The present study therefore focuses on examining the structure and conduct of the Oral French component of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) so as to ascertain the extent to which it measures the oral communication competence of students. To achieve the objectives of this study, we first look at communicative language testing followed by the assessment of students' oral competence in French. The results of the study and recommendations are then presented with a conclusion.

### ***1.1 Communicative language testing***

Chapelle and Brindley (2010: 247) define language testing as *a way of gathering data and evaluating the learner's language awareness and their capacity to use it*. This implies that testing helps in observing the learner's improvement in the language. What then are communicative language tests (CLT)? Phan (2008) explains CLT as tests that define language learners' capacity to communicate effectively in a language in actual communicative situations. Phan explains that in putting together a test to measure the communicative competence, taking note of the learners' language needs in relation to communicative situations they would be encountering in real life is key. According to Fulcher (2000: 487), communicative tests exhibit performance, authenticity and real-life outcomes. With regard to performance, test-takers produce language through direct interaction involving the variation of expression and content as well as through a blend of listening and speaking skills. The test being authentic requires that input and prompts are not simplified for the learners, the test-takers identify and respond to communicative purpose within specific contexts appropriately. Finally, the marks of communicative tests are awarded based on real-life outcomes in that they focus on finding out whether the test-taker was capable of achieving the anticipated communicative outcome. The characteristics of communicative test as explained by Fulcher indicates that when testing language competence of a learner, the focus should be on getting the learner to express himself or herself spontaneously in real life related situations. Brown (2005: 21) also proposes five main characteristics for creating a CLT. These include *“meaningful communication, authentic situation, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and integrated language skills”*. These characteristics as stated by Brown are very much similar to that of Fulcher (2000) in the sense that both authors believe CLTs should be related to real life situations and also provide the opportunity for learners to express themselves extemporaneously. The SHS French syllabus, that guides, among other things, the content of the testing instruments of the SHS French in Ghana, is founded on the Communicative Approach (CA) to language learning (Dumenyah, 2015). The CA introduced in 1970s emphasizes the ability of the learner's to properly achieve real communicative goals in real life situations (Morrow, 2018). The impact

of the CA on language teaching is seen in the fact that teachers of language are now likely to adopt activities that are similar to real life situations (Richards, 2005). The approach encourages the use of new testing activities that bring to bear tasks that are related to real-life, genuineness, and performance (Fulcher, 2000). Morrow (2018) also insists that testing activities should also be so natural that authentic documents or simulated conversations like role plays should always be used. We are of the opinion that tests do not have to only assess learners' language competence (and their use of it) but also how they use their language competence in real communicative situations (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Morrow, 2018). This is because language is meant for communicative purposes and as such, having knowledge in a language must translate into the ability to use that knowledge to communicate in real life situations when they present themselves. This fact is well captured in the SHS French syllabus "the current trend towards international co-operation, peaceful co-existence and technology transfer, necessitates that a person be able to communicate in a language that is understood by his/her neighbours" (MOE, 2010: ii). This indicates clearly that the syllabus acknowledges the importance of preparing students for real life communication.

### **1.2 Assessment and evaluation**

Explaining language assessment, Purpura (2016) opines that it is a term that generally refers to a *systematic procedure for eliciting test and non-test data* which helps the assessor make predictions or assertions about certain language-related features of a test-taker. This means that the main aim is to get the learner to exhibit traits that show their level of competence through pre-determined means in order to draw conclusions about their scores. Bachman and Palmer (2010) also viewed quality second language assessments as that which has substantive grounding to elicit information from a strict and observable body of content derived from lessons in a course manual and a syllabus. Both mainstream education and second language assessment have also been motivated by a formative assessment (FA) which is also known as assessment FOR learning (AFL). This means making available information to advance knowledge acquisition and use, unlike summative assessment; which is also referred to as *Assessment of Learning* (AOL), by giving information on one's achievements (Black & William, 1998). This implies that whatever feedback that is gotten from a formative assessment goes to inform the level of learning that took place as well as provide future direction towards improvement of practice for both teachers and learners. (Black & William, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 2002). It is worthy to note that Formative Assessment is based on the creation and seizing of opportunities which better inform all the agents (teachers and learners) of the assessment to make critical decisions towards the needed instructional adjustments that could improve learning beyond what would have happened without those adjustments. FA also enables learners to attain better learning outcomes that are applicable in the larger society. (OECD/CERI, 2008). It does not only help in promoting high performance among students (Black & William, 1998) but equally promotes high equity to improve the performance among the disadvantaged where individual differences in learners' success in various subjects' areas are established and appropriate teaching technique is developed to refrain from assigning same task to all but assign tasks with individual difference embedded (Bruner, 1996; Perrenoud, 1998; Bishop & Glynn, 1999).

Based on the above arguments, it can be concluded that effective FA of oral skills in our language classrooms can help monitor the extent to which oral skills in French language is put to good use. Despite these advantages evoked, we have observed that FA is continually

seen by many teachers to be in conflict with the summative/external assessment. On the other hand, it is often noticed in schools where summative assessment is prioritized that, teachers feel compelled to ‘teach to just prepare learners to pass the test while learners also, strategize to perform well on tests instead of trying to understand and master new knowledge (OECD/CERI, 2008). This inability to amalgamate the two assessment techniques to inform policy formulation and reforms could be inimical to the set goals in language studies in particular and education systems in general. Let us now discuss how oral skills of SHS students of French in Ghana are assessed.

### *1.3 Assessment of Oral production competency of SHS Students of French in Ghana*

In Siddiek’s (2010) view, educational assessment goes beyond just the practice of awarding marks to students but it encompasses every effort to determine learner’s true achievements. This is to say that in assessing students, one must pay attention to all that the learner does to show proof of knowledge acquired; in our case, it is about what the learner can do in the French language. In Ghana, learners’ achievement is ascertained through two main levels of mastery of knowledge in the four language skills taught in schools (MOE, 2010). They are weighted according to the importance that must be attached to each of them in terms of instruction and assessment. The dimensions and skills require that 30% attention be paid to skills that demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the French language with 70% consideration given to teaching, learning and assessment of students’ skills that show the use and application of knowledge acquired. MOE (2010) further directs specifically that 20% priority be given to listening comprehension; 20% for reading comprehension (which are considered as showing evidence of knowledge and understanding of French) and 30% attention each be given to speaking and writing (which are also evidence of use and application of knowledge gained in the French language).

In addition, the SHS syllabus for French (MOE, 2010) gave a specific guideline for assessment. In the said guideline was the three examination components that include grammar and usage in appropriate context, short essay test items (about 100 words) and the oral test component. The oral component of the examination at SHS level which is the focus of the paper includes, listening comprehension, reading and conversation. Listening comprehension segment tests the learners’ ability to listen to and understand a passage read out to them and answer questions based on it. Also, candidates’ ability to read aloud simple passages in French is tested in the reading segment. Then, candidates are tested on how to converse correctly and fluently with confidence in French for a short period of time. The examining body, the West African Examination Council adheres strictly to the guideline proposed in the SHS French syllabus. The tables 1 and 2 below show the assessment criteria contained in the SHS syllabus and the WASSCE examination respectively.

Table 1: Oral French Assessment criteria by MOE (2010: xii)

Dimensions	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3	SBA	Total	% Weight of dimensions
Knowledge and Understanding	Section A Comprehension Passage Questions (40 marks)	-	Listening Comprehension Reading  (30 marks)	30	100	30
Use of Knowledge	Section B Grammar and Structure (50 marks)	Letter Writing Narrative/ Descriptive/ Argumentative essay  (80 marks)	Conversation Dialogue General questions & literature/ exposition  (50 marks)	20	200	70
Total	90	80	80	50	300	100

Table 2: Oral French Assessment criteria by WAEC (2013)

Test	Test Type	Total Mark allotted
A	Listening Comprehension	10 marks
B	Reading 1.Pronunciation 2.Fluency	10 marks 5 marks
C	Conversation (a) Dialogue (10 questions) (b) Exposition (i) Adequacy of sentence structure (ii) Appropriateness of vocabulary (iii) Fluency of candidate	20 marks (2 marks each)  2 marks 2 marks 1 mark

Since this paper focuses on the analysis of oral production competencies of SHS French candidates, we juxtaposed the skills and mark allocations in the paper 3 (Table 1) with those found on WASSCE Oral French Record Form (Table 2). The review on the various skills that MOE (2010) prescribed to be tested at the SHS level Oral French synchronizes with those skills that are tested by WAEC. It is further discovered that the order in which the skills are presented on the dimensions prescribed by MOE (2010) is followed by WAEC. In other words, the listening comprehension test is administered first, then, reading test and finally the conversation test ends the Oral French paper just the same as the order in which the skills are arranged on the dimensions.

#### 1.4 Validity of the test

The term ‘validity’ has to do with whether or not a test measure what it is supposed to measure (Lado 1961) Messick (1989, as cited in John, 2015, p. 64) also viewed validity as how accurate a student’s examination results reflects their true learning abilities. These two viewpoints show that a valid test must be seen to measure what it sets out to measure. It is

based on this understanding that we wonder if the WASSCE Oral French examination is probably facing validity issues considering the lacuna between the required purpose of the test (testing how candidates can use the French orally in real life situations) and the real ability displayed by candidates (difficulty in communicating in French) after passing the said tests. We believe that the ability of SHS students of French to use the language when speaking and listening in real life situations is what the WAEC's Oral French examination is expected to establish. Is that, however, the case? Evidently, just as Hughes (2003) also observed, the evaluation of language has moved far from testing structures requiring tests of isolated language components to viewing language as a functional communication tool, whereby test items measures how learners can use the language to communicate. We, therefore, are of the opinion that the construction of any test requires a thorough consideration of its validity. We believe that it is critical to consider the degree to which grades awarded in the French language oral test are valid reflections of the skill or proficiency that an assessment is intended to measure.

## 2. Methods

This study intends to examine the structure and conduct of the WASSCE Oral French examinations in order to establish its role in developing the oral communication competence of its candidates at the SHS level and to suggest innovative ways of evaluating students. The study used the qualitative approach involving unstructured interviews to gather preliminary data from 80 students in four (4) tertiary institutions in Ghana in order to confirm whether the students who have excelled in the WASSCE Oral French examinations have difficulty in communicating in French after their three years of study at the SHS. These tertiary institutions include two Colleges of Education, namely Mount Mary College of Education, Somanya (MOMACO), Bagabaga College of Education, Tamale (BACE) and two Universities: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi and the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA).

Students from the four tertiary institutions were selected using purposive sampling because we sought to gather data on students who had previously studied French at SHS level and were studying French at the tertiary institutions where it was relatively easier for us to access the data. Interviews with the students were done through informal interactions to enable students feel at ease to express themselves in the French language. They were engaged in conversations that bordered on everyday life situations such as life at the tertiary institution, challenges of the French programme, asking directions, talking about one's family, talking about their likes and dislikes and introducing someone. With their permission sought, we recorded the interview sessions and later transcribed them for analysis. Some few respondents declined the permission but allowed us to take notes. While we conducted the interview, our attention was focused more on how respondents were able to sustain conversation using French rather than the correctness of their answers.

We also gathered data, through interviews, from teachers of French from the southern and northern sectors of Ghana particularly from cities where the French language is taught in most schools. We purposively sampled Tamale and Accra from the two zones. Ten SHSs were randomly sampled from each city where one teacher of French from each of the selected schools was interviewed. According to Athanases and Heath (1995: 273), "teachers have reasons for what they do, whether articulated or tacit, that reflect wisdom of practice". We therefore deemed it necessary to solicit their views on the conduct of the Oral French examination since the said examination is also conducted by teachers at that level as



assistant examiners. In addition, five (5) coordinators, randomly selected out of the ten (10) Regional Centres for teaching of French (CREFs) across the country were also used. It is worth noting that CREF coordinators are automatic examiners for WAEC who coordinate assistant examiners at the regional levels. Their inclusion in the study contributed in getting technical information most of which correlate with the Chief Examiner's 2015 and 2016 annual reports on Oral French examination. The data collected from the students were analysed followed by those from teachers and the regional coordinators. We considered all the responses using detailed descriptive presentations of data on the structure and conduct of the Oral French examination. Results on the components of the test were collated from the ten teachers and five CREF coordinators. Results on the mode of conduct of the examination followed the same way as those on the structure.

### 3. Results

This part of the study shows the results of the data collected. A preliminary data collected sought to confirm the perceived difficulty students have in communicating in French even after obtaining good grades in the French examination. The appropriateness of test items and mode of conduct of the Oral French component were analysed in relation to how candidates demonstrate their oral communication skills development.

#### 3.1 Students' communication difficulty in French

It was observed during the interviews that some of the students lacked spontaneity and were too careful to speak lest they make mistakes. They had difficulty forming simple sentences in French to express their thoughts on the issues being discussed as evidenced in the extract below:

##### Extract 1

Interviewer : *Quelle manifestation aura lieu à la soirée d'aujourd'hui ?*

Female Student A : *Aujourd'hui, aujourd'hui il a un film show but I don't know ...*

Interviewer : *Je n'étais pas au campus le week-end passé, la sortie de ce week-end-là, c'était bien passé ?*

Student A : *Monsieur, c'était, hmm... très très intéressant.*

The student in extract 1 was able to understand each question posed but lacked adequate vocabulary to express herself accordingly. Some could not understand the questions asked them despite the interviewer's attempts of rephrasing as depicted in extract 2 where Student B gave two different wrong answers to the same question from the interviewer.

##### Extract 2

Interviewer : *Vous avez des cours de français ce matin ?*

Student B : *Ça va très bien*

Interviewer : *Ok, mais vous avez une leçon de français ce matin ?*

Student B : *French, oui monsieur, je suis...eh... French student*

Generally, similar responses were received during our series of interactions with students in all the selected institutions. We think this should not be the case of a student who has learnt French at the Basic and Senior High School levels. This was consistent with Kuupole (2012)'s observation that most students of French at the tertiary institutions could not speak French well. There were however a few students who were fluent in French but they attested to the fact that they had ever studied in a francophone country.



Due to the unimpressive output of the students during the interviews, the opinions of some teachers of French at the Senior High School level and coordinators of regional resource centres in charge of the teaching of French in Ghana were sought through interviews on possible reasons for the inability of students to communicate in basic French after getting very good grades in French in the WASSCE. The teachers and the coordinators attributed the problem to several reasons including inefficient teaching strategies, the way the Oral French paper is conducted, low interest level of the students, unavailability of useful teaching and learning resources in the schools and insufficient time devoted to the practice of Oral French.

Most of the teachers and coordinators asserted that the test items although could be improved, were rich enough to test candidates' ability to speak effectively. They however believe that the inability of students to communicate in French is also as a result of more attention given to the development of the written skills at the neglect of oral skills. This finding corroborates Kuupole (2012)'s assertion that learners at this level spend their time writing instead of speaking the language. Respondents indicated that most teachers start teaching the oral components in the final year when the examination is drawing near, focusing at this point on strategies that could aid success in the examination and thereby neglecting the development of their language skills when it should have been their focus throughout the three-year study period. From the findings above, it is clear that only one cause (the conduct of the Oral French Examination) relates to the examining body, WAEC. The rest are school-based issues ranging from inadequate teaching and learning of the Oral French, students' negative attitudes towards the learning of French to the culture of teaching students to pass examination. Notwithstanding, the role of the examination cannot be underestimated as it has the potential to influence how teachers tailor their teaching strategies and attention (Lueng, Mok & Wong, 2008). The interviewees explained that the students do not show much interest in speaking French for several reasons. One being the fact that it is a foreign language and it is hardly spoken in Ghana. As a result, the students barely make much effort in developing their language skills. However, since they, as teachers, cannot afford to have their students failing at the WASSCE, they have to resort to preparing them to pass the final examinations without focusing on developing their oral communicative skills.

### 3.2 Composition and Conduct of the WASSCE Oral French

Through the question, "*As an examiner what has been your experience regarding the Oral French exams?*" we sought to find out from teachers what comprises the oral component of the WASSCE French examination and how it is conducted. It was revealed that the Oral French is conducted in three days across the country within which all candidates concerned must be examined. Also, our respondents revealed that the whole exercise is preceded by a rigorous coordination in Accra where selected assistant examiners are trained on the modus operandi of the examination. It was further noted that the examiners are designated to various examination centres where candidates cluster, depending on their number and proximity. It was explained that WAEC does the clustering, if the need be, before examiners are dispatched. The respondents also explained that examiners move in group with a team leader (a notable personality with expertise in the conduct of the exams) for security reasons and to avoid possible compromise or collision. The extract below confirms the duration of the exams and exposes the possibility of foreknowledge of the tested words (only these words are actually assessed during the reading) on the part of the students.

## Extract 3

Interviewer: *Could you please explain your points?*

Teacher A: *We are made to conduct the oral exams for candidates within three days. Though the content, in my view, is very good to assess them, one normally realizes during the exams that some candidates have foreknowledge on the tested words under the reading test. I say this because one observes that candidates find it difficult to pronounce simple words such as **est, fait, les élèves**, etc. provided they are not to be tested. However, during the reading test, the candidates pronounce the tested words well as if they had rehearsed them.*

The response from the teacher shows that even though the students have challenges pronouncing simple words while reading, they do not encounter such a difficulty when articulating the tested words. This is indicative of the said students having had the chance to be prepared on the pronunciation of the tested words prior to the examination.

Responding to the sufficiency or otherwise of the duration of the conduct of the exams, 9 out the 10, representing 90% of the sampled teachers were of the view that the time is woefully inadequate for effective assessment. They stated that the large number of candidates they attend to at each centre forces them to work late into the night in order to meet the three days' deadline. It was revealed that sometimes they had to keep candidates waiting up to 11:45 p.m. for their turn. It was explained further that such situations normally occur when they have to move to another centre the following day. They lamented that this stress affects the students as well as their assessment work although they try their best to be as professional as possible. However, one respondent noted that he is quite fine with the duration. Nevertheless, he noted that the problem of insufficient time may emanate from the uneven numbers at the various centres which forces examiners to extend the examination time into the night in order to finish the work.

On the composition of the Oral French examination, our respondents were unanimous in their various responses. They said the test is in three parts comprising listening comprehension test, reading test and conversation test. We gathered that the test is marked over 50 marks with 10 marks allotted for listening comprehension test, 15 marks for reading test and 25 marks for conversation test. This is in agreement with the information presented in Table 2 above. When asked of the demands of each of the three parts of the oral test, our respondents detailed each according to what is expected from candidates, mode of conduct, nature of questions, marks awarded and the role of the test to the development of oral skills of candidates in real life situation.

### 3.2.1 Listening Comprehension Test

With regard to the listening comprehension test, the findings show that candidates are required to demonstrate their ability in understanding simple audio documents in French, answer 10 questions of varied forms based on the text after the second reading and provide appropriate answers for two filling in questions. The results also reveal that the test: is administered by a non-native speaker who reads a passage twice in front of candidates; involves candidates being allowed five minutes to study the questions only after the first reading; involves, in all, 10 marks being awarded for correctly answering the ten questions (1 mark for each question); includes one question requiring a true or false answer; and requires that the rest of the questions are multiple choice questions (MCQs).

Our respondents believe that this format of testing comprehension skills brings the examination close to a real-life situation since the candidates get to see, face-to-face, the one reading to them. Listening comprehension test results presented above shows variation of question types (a mixture of multiple-choice questions, open ended questions and true or false questions) which is useful for testing candidates' understanding. Candidates may not succeed in this test by relying on luck. The test also allows two readings of the passage which could help candidates make amends if the need arises. The two readings of the passage are strategic to help make up for the lost information due the fugacity of listening comprehension which poses additional difficulties to candidates. This repeated reading of the passage also reduces largely anxiety associated with the fleeting of oral texts (Sparks & Ganschow, 2007). Of all the four components, the listening comprehension test of is the most objective and least biased thanks to its reduced examiner discretionary judgement in the award of marks.

### 3.2.2 Reading Test

It is discovered from the interviews that the reading test is the second component of the Oral French paper. The respondents explained that each candidate takes turns to read in the presence of an examiner; the reading test is made up of two unseen alternative passages; each candidate is made to select one of the two passages; candidates' correct pronunciation and fluency are evaluated; correct pronunciation of a total of 20 words including one element of *liaison* are tested while the candidate reads out the passage; each correctly pronounced tested items earns the candidate  $\frac{1}{2}$  a mark totalling 10 marks; the examiner has a record form on which the selected words are listed; he pays particular attention to the candidate as he reads in order to get candidate's real pronunciation vis-à-vis the intended pronunciation; the examiner determines how fluent the candidate was while reading the whole passage and a total of 5 marks is awarded in addition to the 10 marks to be awarded for correct pronunciation; and the award of the 5 marks at this point is left solely to the discretion of the examiner.

From the presentation of the above data, it could be noticed that the reading test grants the students the opportunity to communicate a written message to the examiners just as it pertains in real-life situations such as reading of sermon in church, news casting and giving of announcements. It is however observed that the mark awarded for fluency is subject to examiner's impression and discretion. However, this could be abused by examiners due to its subjectivity. This also brings the question of fairness of oral test as suggested by Alderson (1997) because what may impress one examiner to award the overall marks allotted for fluency may not so much impress another.

Respondents (mostly coordinators of CREF) further intimated that the use of two sets of alternative texts by WAEC for the conduct of the three-day examination is problematic since it is susceptible to leakage after the first day's test. They believed that some candidates might have foreknowledge of the tested words and practice their right pronunciation ahead of the examination. Justifying their speculations, the respondents indicated that most candidates find it difficult to pronounce commonly used words in the text which, to them, are expected to be mastered at their level. They, however, are able to pronounce, with ease all tested words, no matter their perceived inherent difficulties.

In response to the way forward to curb such occurrences, respondents varied in suggestions. On one hand, some suggested that WAEC should provide two sets of passages for each day so that same set of passages could only be administered once. On the other hand, others are of the view that WAEC should recruit more assistant examiners so as to

enable one day Oral French examination. Any of the suggestions above is plausible if resources (human or capital) are available. However, the provision of more sets of passages (as suggested above) seems to be more cost effective. It will cost WAEC less to print additional copies than to pay more assistant examiners for coordination and expenses for the conduct of same examination within a day. The provision of different sets of passages and/or questions and keeping them away from the assistant examiners until the day of the examination as suggested by some respondents may reduce any form of leakage.

### 3.2.3 Conversation Test

The data show that the conversation test comprises two parts: dialogue and exposition. Explaining the conversation test, respondents indicated that candidates are engaged in a face-to-face interaction with their examiners. The first part is the dialogue section which is further divided into two sections; one part of the dialogue section demands from candidates to answer 5 simple interactive questions orally on the prescribed literature book studied and the other part required answers to 5 questions on general issues. The results also indicate that a maximum of 2 marks is awarded for each impressive and correct answer and in all, the dialogue section of the conversation test is marked over 20 marks. Also, the exposition section is the second section of the conversation test which comes at the end of the entire Oral French examination. At the exposition section, candidates are asked questions on a topic from themes of general contemporary interest; candidates are expected to speak in at least five sentences on the given topic without any interference from the examiner. The marks are awarded on adequacy of sentence structure, appropriateness of vocabulary and candidate's fluency and a total of 5 marks is awarded at this section. The respondents further explained that the conversation test is time consuming. They also noted that candidates become tensed up and exhibit a level of anxiety during this test and they are extremely careful not to make mistakes.

Naturally, it is discovered that foreign language learning is mostly characterised by emotions such as fear and anxiety, which impacts learners' ability to acquire the language. This reality was effectively illustrated in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Krashen likened learners' emotions to a filter which rises when one experienced negative emotion and lowers whenever one feels positive. This implies that the more the learner feels anxious, uncertain, less confident or fears to make mistakes, the harder learning becomes. This phenomenon extends to assessment of learner's as well. In their study, Sparks and Ganschow (2007) discovered that foreign language learners who had low anxiety toward the language performed much better than their counterparts who had higher levels of anxiety in the examination. Consequently, it seems literature favours the creation of a relaxed and positive environment for assessment can help students lower their affective filters. Notably, anxiety, as noted by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), is associated with a high affective filter while learning a foreign language.

Foreign language learning anxiety manifests in the form of stress, uncertainty on some language learning situations such as unwillingness to freely communicate, test related nervousness and fear of unfavourable assessment in general.

These negative emotions could be detrimental to learners' performance in examination, self-confidence in learning, as well as their self-esteem at large (Sağlamel & Kayaoglu, 2013). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) observed that learners consider listening and speaking as major sources of anxiety that confronts learners during a foreign language

learning process. Hewitt & Stephenson, (2012) also noticed that anxiety negatively affects learners in their performance orally. Obviously, this important emphasis on the need to create an enabling environment for candidates cannot be overlooked during the conduct of oral examinations such as WASSCE Oral French.

It was noted from our analysis of data on the conversation test that it is a good test as it tests the listening and speaking skills. We also noted that the whole Oral French examination is valid as it tests what it intends to measure. Based on the content of the SHS French curriculum, we noticed that the assessment in the Oral French examination is valid in content as it matches the content of the curriculum. It also meets validity criterion which has to do with explicit procedures correlating with particular behaviours expected. Also, the construct of the examination is valid when the scores reflect the items being tested (Frost et al, 2011). However, results showed issue of subjectivity in the award of marks in the three components except in the listening comprehension test which has the least mark allocation. In the conversation, reading and exposition tests, there are marks awarded at the discretion of the examiner. This might bring about bias as different examiners may differ in judgement (Brown & Hudson, 1998).

Generally, the results revealed appreciable test items which could have rightfully determined the true competencies of candidates in various oral skills components tested. However, the three days' span of the examination with just two sets of questions makes it susceptible to leakage. Though not fully proven with any empirical evidence, respondents were of the view that leakage of examination question may affect validity of the examination and the integrity of WAEC.

#### 4. Discussions

The research conducted revealed that the structure and conduct of the examination has a huge impact on the teaching process of French. This is because it determines to a large extent, teachers' focus in teaching. It was also discovered that most teachers are more focused on preparing students to pass the examination to the neglect of development of real oral communicative skills of students. The results also revealed that examiners are overstressed with large number of students they have to handle at a sitting during the administration/conduct of the examination. This undermines the quality of time the candidate will spend before the examiner. It is therefore recommended that WAEC recruits more examiners to enable the ratio of students to an examiner be a sizeable number that the examiner can handle easily without stress. The increase in the number of examiners will ensure that the examination is administered within a day across the country. This would help minimize any possibility of candidates circulating parts of the examination after the first day. Alternatively, depending on the situation regarding availability or otherwise of qualified assistant examiners, the number of days could be increased to five days and the same number of examiners would be deployed to conduct the examination to enable examiners do diligent assessment. The issue of subjectivity also emanates from the use of the communicative approach of teaching French which places much prominence on the usage of language than its structure. The problem of subjectivity according to Gracia (2001) is due to the way of evaluating the production skills (speaking and writing) of the language considering the difficulties associated with the marking especially when the students' oral answers are not recorded. Congruent with what McNamara (1998: 313) anticipated concerning a "future reconsideration of the social impact of technology in the delivery of tests", we recommend that WAEC acquires and encourages the use of video recording gadgets for oral

examinations. Burstein, Frase, Ginther and Grant (1996) also advocate for new technological innovations in test design, construction, trialling, delivery, management, scoring, analysis and reporting. Recording and playing back the oral expressions of students' oral presentations can aid in a better appreciation of the students' performance as well as allow for revision and improvement on earlier works in the language class. Through this, WAEC will be able to cross check marks awarded with the performance of candidates thereby preventing examiners from giving out marks out of sympathy and also preventing students from being awarded marks they do not deserve. This will also encourage teachers and students to give more attention to developing speaking skills.

## 5. Recommendations

First and foremost, we advise that the teachers should not neglect the practice of oral skills and focus solely on the teaching of language structure. Developing oral communication skill should be their focus right from the first year and not only when the students get to the final year; this will build students ability to communicate effectively. It is also recommended that two different sets of questions be used each day; instead of the two sets of questions currently used for the assessment over a span of three days, each day will have its own sets of questions with equal weighting and coverage. With this alternative, the examiner is not allowed access to the questions until the day of examination just as it is done for the written papers. This may equally help reduce foreknowledge of questions by candidates. Also, the pre-examination coordination should be done solely with dummies but not with the actual questions to avoid any temptations to circulate the questions to colleagues and students. Based on the issue of anxiety experienced by students during the conversation test as raised by our interviewees, we recommend that instead of the individual assessment, WAEC could opt for group performances to reduce the level of anxiety experienced by candidates during the test; the examiners will award marks according to the individual and group output. This could take the form of short sketches and role plays as suggested by Morrow (2018) to replace the conversation and exposition part of the oral test. The theme of the sketch and group (of two or three) will be made known only on the day of the examination. This will create real-life communicative situations to enable the candidates express themselves with their colleagues and make teachers of French at the SHS level attach more importance to developing effectively the speaking skills of their candidates. This paper also recommends that more marks be allocated to the oral examination compared to the written. We suggest that 60% of the total marks be allotted to the oral test and 40% for the written test as a way of encouraging teachers and students to focus more on oral skills. The establishment of French clubs in all Senior High Schools where French is studied as well as exchange programmes between French countries and Ghana as suggested by Associates for Change (2010) will also help improve the speaking skills of the students. Finally, we recommend by re-echoing the position of Yegblemenawo (2008) that all African countries should not rely on foreign methods and pedagogy alone but also try to adopt methods (of teaching Oral French in our case) that will fit their own situation and curriculum.



## Conclusion

This study was initiated upon the observation that students of French in tertiary institutions in Ghana find it difficult to communicate orally using French. Knowing that there could be several perspectives to studying the phenomenon, we chose to investigate the problem from the angle of assessment as teaching and learning goes in tandem with assessment. We focussed on the impact of the WASSCE Oral French component on the oral communication competencies of candidates. The appropriateness of the test items and the mode of conduct of the examination were specifically examined. The study drew on the perspective of coordinators of CREF and teachers of French at SHS level who double as examiners. We adopted a qualitative research paradigm using descriptive data analysis method. Aside the absence of meaningful utterances, the students lacked spontaneity and fluency in their speeches and understanding of questions. It was also discovered that the test items proposed for candidates in the WASSCE Oral French examination are rich enough to test the level of candidates' proficiency in oral communication in French. However, same could not be said about the conduct of the examination. The results showed that the examiners are overstressed and that administering only two sets of question nation-wide within three days is problematic. This could compromise the effectiveness of the examination process as others yet to take their turn would be preview to test items and thereby reducing the appropriateness of the examination to identify the true proficiency levels of candidates in French. This could explain partly the difficulties faced by students at the tertiary level who had previously studied French in SHS to communicate orally in French despite obtaining good grades in French. It was also revealed that most teachers were so focused on getting students to pass the examination and do not really do much to develop real life communicative skills in the students. To remedy the situation, the study recommended, among other things, the use of video/audio recording gadgets for documentation of examination process, provision of two sets of questions for each day and the need for assistant examiners to have access to them only on the day of the examination. Others are the proposition that the conversation test be done in the form of role plays and sketches in order to reduce students' anxiety level during the examination. In sum, the development of the communicative competencies will enable learners communicate effectively in writing and oral forms; therefore, the examination of French must be done with much innovativeness that would compel teachers to adopt effective teaching strategies to enhance students' communicative prowess.

## References

- Agbefle, K. G. (2014). La place marginale du français au Ghana : un statut bien trompeur sur les médias et dans les écoles. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (IJHCS)*, 1(3), 1-11.
- Alderson, J. C. (1997). Ethics and language testing. [Paper presentation] Annual (TESOL) Convention, Orlando, Florida.
- Associates for Change (2010, November). The Status of French Language Teaching and learning across Ghana's Public Education System.



- Athanases, S. Z. & Heath, S. B. (1995). Ethnography in the study of the teaching and learning of English. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 29 (3), 263–287.
- Bachman, L. F. & Palmer, A. S. (2010). *Language assessment in practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Bishop, R. & Glynn, T. (1999). *Culture Counts: Changing Power Relations in Education*. Dunmore Press.
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7-74.
- Brown, D. J. (2005). *Testing in language program*. McGraw-Hill.
- Brown, D. J & Hudson, T. (1998). The alternatives in Language assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (4), 653-675.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*. Harvard University Press.
- Burstein, J., Frase, L. T., Ginther, A. & Grant, L. (1996). Technologies for Language assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 16, 240-260.
- Chapelle, C. A., & Brindley, G. (2010). Assessment. In N. Schmitt (ed.). *An introduction to applied linguistics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (pp. 247–266). Routledge.
- Chapelle, C. A. (1999). Validity in Language Assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 19, 254-272.
- DeMeo, R. (2016). Maintaining and Progressing in a Learned Language. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 4 (2), 16-21.
- Dumenyah, J. K. (2015). Impact de l'approche communicative sur la performance orale des apprenants de FLE dans quelques lycées de la Métropole d'Accra [Masters thesis, University of Ghana].
- Frost, K., Elder, C. & Wigglesworth, G. (2011). Investigating the validity of an integrated listening- speaking task: a discourse-based analysis of test takers' oral performances. *Language Testing*, 29(3), 345-369.
- Fulcher, G. & Davidson, F. (2007). *Language Testing and Assessment: An Advanced Resource Book*. Longman.
- Fulcher, G. (2000a). The 'communicative' legacy in language testing. *System*, 28(4), 483–497.
- Garcia, S. S. (2001). L'évaluation de l'expression Orale dans les Cours de Français au Delex et aux Centres de Langues de l'université de Veracruz. [Master's thesis. Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa]
- Hewitt, E. & Stephenson, J. (2012). Foreign language anxiety and oral exam performance: a replication of Phillips's MLJ Study. *The Modern Language Journal*. 96 (2), 170–189.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70 (2), 125-132.
- Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- John, A.C. (2015). Reliability and Validity: A Sine Qua Non for Fair Assessment of Undergraduate Technical and Vocational Education Projects in Nigerian Universities. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6 (34), 68-75.

- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Kuupole, D. D., Kuupole, A.Z.P. & Author, C.C. (2009). Analysis of learners' appraisal of their oral and written competences in French as a Foreign Language at the University of Cape Coast. *Cahiers du CERLESHS*, 33, 223-248.
- Kuupole, A. Z. P. (2012). Assessing Oral production in French in Colleges of Education in Ghana: The Role and multiple identity of the Assessor. In D.D. Kuupole, & M. K. Kambou. (eds), *National Development through Language Education*. (pp. 323-342). University Printing Press.
- Lee, G. (2009). Speaking up: Six Korean students' oral participation in class discussions in US graduate seminars. *English for Specific Purposes*, 28: 142-156.
- Lueng, S. A., Mok, E. & Wong, D. (2008). The impact of assessment methods on the learning of nursing students. *Nurse Education Today*, 28, 711-719.
- MOE, (2010). Teaching syllabus for French, (Senior High School 1-3), Curriculum Research and Development Division (CRDD), Accra, Ghana.
- Morrow, C. K. (2018). Communicative Language Testing. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language*, 1-7.
- McNamara, T. (1998). Policy and social considerations in language assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 18, 304-319.
- Nazara, S. (2011). Students' perception on EFL speaking skill development. *Journal of English Teaching*. 1(1), 28-43.
- Nimako, R. D. (2014). The relevance of French language in Ghana's relations with francophone West Africa. [Master's thesis, University of Ghana].
- Nguyen, C. & Le, D. (2012). Communicative language testing: Do school tests measure students' communicative competence? *Regional Language Centre Journal*, 42(1), 856 864.
- OECD/CERI (2008, May). *Assessment for Learning: the case for Formative Assessment*. OECD/CERI International Conference "Learning in the 21st Century: Research, Innovation and Policy". Paris.
- Perrenoud, P. (1998). From formative evaluation to a controlled regulation of learning processes. Towards a wider conceptual field. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5(1), 85-102.
- Phan, S. (2008). Communicative language testing. TESOL Professional Development. Hawaii Pacific University, *Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages Working Paper series* 6, 3-10.
- Purpura, J. E. (2016). Second and foreign language assessment. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100 (S1), 190-208.
- Richards, J. C. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sağlamel, H., Mustafa, N. & Kayaoğlu, M. N. (2013). Creative Drama: A possible way to alleviate foreign language anxiety. *Regional Language Centre Journal*, 44(3), 377-394.

- Siddiek, A. G. (2010). The impact of test content validity on language teaching and learning. *Asian Social Science*, 6(12), 133-143.
- Sparks, R. & Ganschow, L. (2007). Is the foreign language classroom anxiety scale measuring anxiety or language skills? *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(2), 260–287.
- WAEC (2013). WASSCE May/June oral French record form, Accra.
- Xia, S. (2009). Are they ready to participate? East Asian students' acquisition of verbal participation in American classrooms. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 17(2). 137-157.
- Yegblemenawo, A. Y. A. (2008). Pour une pédagogie des grands groupes : l'enseignement/apprentissage du français en milieu scolaire institutionnel ghanéen. In: Kuupole (ed.), *Teaching and Learning of Language, Culture and Literature of West Africa*. (pp. 96-106). Catholic Mission Press.