# Managing Language Testing in Nigerian Large Classes:

# Processes and Prospects

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**Abstract**

The demand for literacy in a developing country like Nigeria has multiple results such as the expansion, by leaps and bounds, of the average Nigerian classroom. This paper highlights the reasons for large classes in Nigerian secondary schools, the educational and psychological dimensions of language testing in large classes, the challenges of such classes and how they affect achievement and in the long run, the standard of education.   It also tasks the proficiency levels of English Language teachers especially in the area of testing and points out new paradigms in language testing, particularly in large classes from the two perspectives of human and infrastructural development, and teacher empowerment and initiatives. The study suggests methods of improving language testing in large classes through pragmatic techniques.

**Keywords**: Language testing, Large classes, Human and infrastructural development, Teacher empowerment and initiatives

## 1. Introduction

Language testing is not a new subject for research as studies abound in this area. Large classes constitute a perennial problem in the Nigerian educational system, which is not different from most third world nations. This is not surprising in the light of The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA, 1990:155) claims that more than 960 million adults are illiterate. The problem of large classes is diverse in that it starts from the fundamental stage of culture, societal stereotypes, planning, funding, implementation, supervision and testing, among others. The problem of testing is not only situated in the fact that some of the teachers are not competent in that area or the volume of paper work (marking) for the teacher is more, but also in that the students do not get enough practice exercises in the four language skills and thus consequently do not perform well in exams.

This reality is even more pronounced in such a country like Nigeria where English is a second language and the level of proficiency in it is sometimes minimal. Also, while the motivation to learn this language is high the learning environment may not be conducive due to inadequate learning materials, over-crowded classes and ill-motivated teachers, among other factors. Thus, the teacher has to contend with a crowd of students whose expectations are high concerning how that teacher meets their individual learning needs, but whose level of motivation may be very low.   Perhaps, the most important concern to educational planners, examination bodies, schools, parents and even the students themselves is the high failure rate of students in English in external examinations such as West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE), National Examinations Council (NECO) and Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB). For instance, out of the 1,369,142 that registered for WASCE in 2008, only 1005 (13.76%) passed at credit level (WAEC Public Affairs Dept., Lagos). Yet, large classes or no, students have to be taught and tested in schools since testing is an integral part of the language curriculum, and indeed, any academic programme. It is therefore necessary to examine the processes and prospects involved in administering language tests in large classes in Nigeria and strategies that can help manage such classes.

## 2. What are tests?

For anybody to read and understand this paper, that person must have written several tests. Thus, we know that a test is a measuring device we use when we want to compare an individual with other individuals who belong to the same group (Ingram, 1974). For instance, if we want to compare weight, height, colour, etc. there must be a yard stick such as "*Favour is fatter than Martha*". Designing a test or writing a test is not an easy task. For instance, whenever people are told that there would be a test, they are generally not comfortable with that idea. This is because many of us see tests as formidable challenges. Tests are sensitive and usually require some degree of trial and error, both for the teacher and his student. They are equally an integral part of the language curriculum because they enable teachers to re-define objectives, evaluate their methods and assess students'

activities. Tests also assist in diagnosing the individual's specific strengths and weaknesses, the extent of students' achievement of instructional goals and determine the student's readiness for some instructional programmes. Scholars generally see tests as either assessments or evaluation. In Nigeria, The School Based Assessment (SBA) among other things, enables the child to participate in his own assessment and is usually comprised of teacher-made tests developed and administered by schools either weekly, once or twice a term or on a yearly basis (NTI, 2006). This makes it wider, more open and more objective than the Continuous Assessment which is done at regular intervals over a period of time with the teacher being most probably the only assessor.

*2.1 Why people do not like tests*

Learning in Nigeria is largely exam-oriented because of the undue emphasis on paper qualification which is usually based on performance in just one examination for admission or certification purposes (Adeyanju, 1989; Nwagwu, 1997). In most cases, employment and or promotion opportunities are largely dependent on one's qualification even when that candidate has little or no experience. Thus, students do a lot of last minute cramming even when they did not actually work hard during the course. Another challenge is that of cheating or exam malpractice where students and sometimes even parents and supposed exam supervisors indulge in all forms of irregular and unorthodox practices to ensure that students pass by all means (Alutu & Aluede, 2006) and once they have passed, they are not bothered whether they forget all that they have learned or not. Some students, for certain reasons such as ill-health, emotional trauma, as in the loss of loved ones, a parent, lack of adequate preparation, etc may not do well in a test given at such a time. This means that such test is not a true assessment or interpretation of that student's knowledge and ability, yet tests are a crucial part of the language curriculum.

Tests assess both the teacher and the students. For instance, if the aim is to assess the extent of the student achievement of instructional goals, the implication is that the teacher is also being tested. Unfortunately, some of the teachers lack competence since they cannot teach what they do not know and, according to Olaofe (2004), they end up transferring their incompetence and errors to their students because instructional goals cannot be achieved without a focused, up-to-date and professional approach to the teaching of language. Also, tests give students a sense of accomplishment as well as self-esteem because if a student does well in a test, the interpretation is that he knows what he is supposed to know and he is at the level where he is supposed to be. It equally provides information on what students do not know but which they need to know. It gingers them up to review what they know and try to cover areas of deficiency. Thus, it helps students to consolidate and expand their frontiers of knowledge and equally tells students how much progress they have made and how far they will still need to go. If students do well, it is usually very motivating for them; giving them a sense of self-satisfaction and achievement.

Students study more when a test or exam is imminent as there is hardly an empty seat in the library and everybody is busy. Indeed, the fear of failure is another motivating factor since no one wants to be associated with failure. Then, the feedback after a test serves as another opportunity to consolidate what students have learned. If a student did not do well during a test he or she is made to see the reason why. Of course, this does not rule out the fact that some teachers actually give tests in order to intimidate, harass and even destroy students' self-esteem or humiliate them. The psychological effect of this on students can only be imagined particularly since Trevisan (2002) notes that while regular, well-planned assessment has positive impact on students, poor assessment impacts negatively on such students. It is not uncommon for teachers to announce that they are giving a test when they notice the absence of some students or they observe that students are not paying attention.   If a test causes too much anxiety in the students, it is not healthy and may not achieve its purpose particularly, in the usually large classes found in most schools in Nigeria.

## 3. Large classes and challenges of language testing

Let us examine the concept of a large class. In a large class, the individual is "buried" in the group. Using one or the same instructional technique, the teacher tries to interact with students of different ages who have varying degrees of background knowledge, different concepts of learning, motivation, interests, abilities and prejudices. They equally have different language learning skills, different levels of competence, and different levels of learning speed. This makes it difficult for the teacher to provide for the individual learning needs and aspirations of each student at the same time and also maintain the required level of discipline in that class. Global organizations such as the UNESCO (2000) and even the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2006) have argued that the population of students in one classroom should not exceed 1: 30 or at most a maximum of 35(teacher: student ratio; 1:35). The idea of "large" is relative depending on the environment. For instance, in

public schools in Nigeria, it may be a class with 50 or more students and only one teacher, whereas, in private schools where school fees and other forms of levy are paid, parents may not tolerate such a large number in one class (Adebayo, 2009).   In this paper therefore, a large class is that class that has more than 35 students.

Thus, Charleston (1976) defines a large class as a class whose numerical strength does not permit the teacher to cope effectively with the demands of the individual student. The inability of the teacher to do this, has resulted into what Olumide, Okebukola & Odubunmi (1987) identify as being responsible for a depressed achievement, negative attitude to work, and raising the anxiety-level of students. Ijaiya (1999) notes that where teachers fail to adequately cater for and control the class, they invariably resort to punishment, which eats into the time allocated for such classes and reduces the level of achievement for that period. Wosyanju (2005) lends her voice to this by arguing that large classes have negative impact on the self-esteem, morale and motivation of the teacher and consequently adversely affecting the students. Fabunmi, Brai-Abu and Adeniji (2007) assert that class congestion adversely affects students' learning input, teacher productivity and academic performance. Akinsolu & Fadokun (2009) argue that teachers were not favourably disposed to teaching large, poorly resourced classes where teaching is mainly teacher-centred and teaching materials and resources are over-stretched, thus impacting negatively on the students' performance. Thus, in a large class, the student is mostly left to his own devices where he is invariably made to either sink or swim due to low level of participation. Our main concern is how this can be effectively managed so that it does not adversely affect the prospects of the future generation as evident in their external examinations results.

## 4. The Processes and Prospects of Language Testing in Nigeria

The processes and prospects of language testing in Nigeria will be examined from two broad perspectives: human and infrastructural development, and teacher empowerment and initiatives.

### 4.1 Human and infrastructural development

This implies the provision and development of adequate human resources, in this case, the manpower required to drive the implementation of the NPE in order to generate realisable goals. Here, all participants in the education process are important, but the most important human resources are located in the ministries of education and the schools, where the latter is of primary importance.   Teachers, tangible and potent forces in the process of shaping the students' future, directly impart knowledge, shape their perceptions, correct misconceptions, and even "download" their own errors for these students to inherit. The shortage of teachers in the Nigerian educational system is a perennial challenge that is largely dependent on the social and economic status of these teachers and (Adeyemi, 2009) argues that the supply of teachers to secondary schools in Nigeria did not match the demand.

Infrastructural development is germaine to the success of any educational system and where these are not available, they result into serious problems. Nwagwu (1997:91) observes that the shortage of infrastructure and facilities are experienced at all levels of the educational system where library facilities, books, classrooms, classroom furniture, workshops, laboratories, etc are virtually non existent. Where some of these are available, they lack either qualified manpower to operate these or the basic necessities of water and electricity. Thus, Adebayo (2009) reports parents' preference for private schools in Nigeria.

### 4.2 Teacher empowerment

Teachers in educational institutions in Nigeria basically fall into two groups: those that are academically qualified and those that are professionally qualified. Ololube (2007) throws more light on this by explaining that academically qualified (non-professional) teachers are those who have academic training without professional teacher training as a result of degrees or certificates obtained from higher educational institutions. While professionally qualified teachers, are teachers who get professional teacher training that gives them "professional knowledge, skills, techniques, aptitude as different from the general education". According to Garuba (2004) the relevance of the teacher to the success of any education programme is not open to contention and as such he argues that since the teacher is central to the achievement of educational goals, it follows that the teacher "must receive priority attention in the conceptualization and implementation" of such goals. Thus, it is actually in order to demand that teachers need to be empowered not only with teaching materials, infrastructure, etc but also mentally, psychologically, financially and materially so that they can easily fit into the society to which they belong. The sense of self-esteem of teachers must be enhanced by government and employers so that these teachers can be more committed and dedicated if they are to be effective in the process of achieving realizable goals in this era of globalization.

*4.3 Teacher initiatives*

For the teacher, tests help to decide if the teaching has been effective, where the students need more attention, what to teach next, etc and the teacher should by all means provide feedback through the discussion of the test items.   Allow the students to talk freely about the questions. Is this the first time they are writing such a test? Were the questions ambiguous? Were the topics adequately taught? Do the answers (from the feedback) tally with their previous knowledge? Then the teacher should note that his/her skills as a test writer are being evaluated. It is in order to ask some questions, for instance, what was the purpose of the test? Were the items adequate? Did I give clear, unambiguous instructions? Did I test what I taught? Was the time allowed enough? Were the questions too difficult or too simple?

More recent types of tests are computer- based tests (Brown, 1997) and web-based tests. Computer and web-based tests are tests accessed either on CDROM or on-line. Usually, the testee will be required to provide identification by using a password, and the test is administered. One of the advantages is that feedback is usually immediate. This is a source of motivation for the testee. It equally pinpoints learners' ability faster and with greater precision. Then the test items are graded in such a way that the testee progresses from simple to difficult. One of the disadvantages includes the fact that such tests are restricted to only the computer-literate testee. Then, the costs of acquiring a personal computer in a country like Nigeria with a myriad of poverty-related problems where many are still struggling to read as well as the possibility of a computer breakdown, not to talk of power outage, are real challenges. A few suggestions come to mind for the teacher who has to test language competence in large classes.

It is usually more convenient for students to grade themselves. Encourage them to do this after giving them a marking guide. It creates a lot of awareness concerning how they understand the topic, what the test actually requires and how the test is graded. Although crucial, try to de-emphasize the marks/grades.

Dividing the class into groups is also an alternative. Some of their work should be done as homework, for instance, finding out facts about topical issues. Then, they could be tested on it in class. Thus, the teacher could pick topics/ issues and ask questions on these. Give project works in groups and let each group come out and tell the class the role played by each student. Thus, if you are using texts, find an appropriate text that is not above the difficulty level of the learners and write out the questions and the instructions, time allowed, marking scheme (for less objective tests), allocate marks for each question/points, etc. Ideally, the test should be pilot-tested.   It is necessary to emphasize here that the result of the test must be analysed to ascertain if the teacher and the students are on the right track. If over 90% got the answers right, then the test is too easy. Conversely, if less than 30% got it right, then it is too difficult.

Keeping an eye on students' work is also very important as well as encouraging healthy competition among the students. For instance, each group produces a newsletter, magazine; bulletin etc. Teachers should get colleagues to assist in teaching, test administration and marking (as a team).   Though easy to score, designing a multi-choice question type is quite tasking since only one item is expected to be correct while the other items (usually about 4) are meant to distract the learner who is not sure of the answer. Having other teachers read and assess your multiple choice questions helps the validity and reliability of such tests.

4.3.1 Other strategies:

Using Pre-reading, During-reading, Post-reading activities, the teacher could involve the students in some of the following activities:

1) Read a passage while students take notes and they should then fill in the blank spaces in their scripts.

2) Use block diagrams to answer questions. Students must have listened to a passage/text, before performing these tasks. The disadvantage of 1 and 2 is that they may copy from each other.

3) Disorganise the sequential arrangement of certain procedures or texts. Let students rearrange procedures/steps in a sequential order from the passage.

4) Identify main idea and supporting ideas in a text.

5) Summarise texts in a specific number of sentences.

6) Solve crossword puzzles photocopied from books, newspapers or designed by the students.

7) Write essays based on Family Tree, for instance.

8) News writing-students can write their own news based on information received or using other formats, strategies or styles.

9) Do word completion in their books where these are available.

10) Use metaphors to capture story lines first verbally, then in writing and these could be graded.

11) Interpret graphs where copies have earlier been made and students could exchange scripts for grading.

12) Classification/word class to increase vocabulary could be an oral test which makes grading easier.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

Since researchers have found a correlation between teachers' beliefs and practices on one hand, and students' conception and performance on the other hand, it is necessary, to encourage teachers to shed stereotypical views that do not accommodate changes in their work as classroom teachers, mentors, supervisors and role models. It is equally important to review one's approach to language testing and assessment. The fact that English is the most important subject in the Nigerian educational system makes it necessary, indeed pertinent, for it to be taught using new paradigms, approaches and strategies.

Teaching is a commitment to making a difference in the lives of students. Because you test what has (usually) been taught, it is important that you reflect regularly on your strategies/methods and approaches in order that you (the teacher) and your students will benefit immensely from these. Knowing the challenges facing a teacher in a large class, one needs to reduce inattention, noise, boredom, tiredness, mischief, and truancy through effective classroom management even where movement within the class is difficult. The most effective strategy would have been to break the class into smaller groups which will be handled by different teachers. However, this is a luxury many schools cannot afford in terms of infrastructure and manpower. We thus have to make the best out of the situation by keeping them busy, occupied, interested and motivated in order that we may achieve our aims and objectives.

Having examined the concept of large classes, the failure rate, why people do not like tests, the contribution of adequate human and infrastructural development, teacher empowerment and initiatives, this paper advocates the following:

1) Schools, local governments, states, regional and national competitions among teachers, which will serve as a wake-up call for the weaker ones.

2) Teacher exchange programmes between Nigeria and other African countries to enable these teachers to assess other (better) educational systems and later, they could go to more developed countries around the world.

3) The insertion of participation in workshops, seminars and conferences as a mandatory criterion in the conditions/guidelines for promotion.

4) Joining of hands with associations such as the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) to establish Reading Rooms, Reading Centres and functional libraries in schools.

5) The various Teachers' Associations should strive to empower their members, particularly from the professional perspective.

6) Regular quality employment of committed teachers and regular review of salaries as well as conditions of service.

7) Regular additional professional experience such as the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) jointly organized by the British Council and NTI are encouraged not just for a few but for teachers that qualify through objective selection procedures.

8) Educational institutions should consider offering degrees in Language Testing.

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