



# Implications of non-assessment of the speaking and listening skills in the Botswana general certificate of secondary education (BGCSE) English language examinations

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## Abstract

Teaching English language revolves around the four language skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading. Although the Botswana General Certificate School Examination (BGCSE) syllabus covers the above four skills, the nature of the final examinations assesses reading and writing skills only. The study seeks to find out the reasons why only two skills are assessed and to analyse the implications of non-assessment of the speaking and reading skills on the students' academic performance. Two qualitative research approaches were used. That is, the Questionnaire and Interview. These methods sought the opinions of English language teachers in four (4) Senior Secondary Schools and Botswana Examinations Council (BEC) officials respectively on the implications of non-assessment of the speaking and listening skills in the BGCSE examinations. The findings reveal that non-assessment of these two skills make teachers focus their attention on the reading and writing skills which are examined. They teach for examinations and less emphasis is placed on the oral communication which builds confidence in the learners' proficiency of the English language. The study recommends that the four language skills should be assessed in the BGCSE final examinations and suggests effective ways of teaching and examining the speaking and listening skills.

**Keywords:** Assessment; Language Skills; Syllabus; Proficiency; Examiners

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## 1. Introduction

The four language skills are critical in learning the English language, particularly in developing countries. It is important that their teaching and assessment should be done equitably so that the student profile is complete regarding language communication competence. The BGCSE syllabus emphasizes the need to teach and assess the four skills but this has not happened. Only reading and writing skills are assessed. The speaking and listening skills are not assessed because systems and facilities are not ready. It is almost 20 years that facilities are not in place to implement the recommendations of the syllabus. In fact the syllabus recommends the two skills to be assessed as continuous assessment which contribute to the student final mark. The paper suggests two methods of assessing speaking skills and specific sub skills for listening to allow teachers to choose relevant skills.

### 1.1. Objectives

The study aims to:

- 1- Find out the importance of the four language skills in the study of English language.
- 2- Find out why reading and writing skills are examined at BGCSE level excluding the speaking and listening skills.
- 3- Analyse the implications of non-assessment of the speaking and listening skills in the BGCSE syllabus.
- 4- Suggest ways of assessing the speaking and listening skills.

### 1.2. Research questions

The paper aims to address the following questions:

- 1- Are the four language skills important in the study of English language at BGCSE?
- 2- Why are the speaking and listening skills not assessed in the BGCSE syllabus?
- 3- What are the implications of not assessing these skills?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The importance of the four language skills in the study of English Language

The study of any language, which involves both its teaching and assessment, centres on the four language skills. These are the skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing. Full competence in a language therefore means mastery of these skills in that particular language learnt. It therefore goes without saying that mastery or acquisition of skills, especially in a learning setup, can be best determined through assessment of these skills. In other words, it is only through their assessment that one can tell whether they have been mastered or not.

When the new BGCSE English Language syllabus was introduced towards the end of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the aim was to teach all the four language skills unlike the old Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) syllabus whose emphasis was almost entirely on reading and writing. The old syllabus then assessed these skills. When the new syllabus came into effect, the expectation was that all the skills would also be assessed in the examinations in order to produce a complete English Language graduate at the end of senior secondary schooling. As Nkosana (2010) puts it, “the BGCSE syllabus provided for the assessment of all the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.”(p.102). However, that has not happened because only reading and writing have been assessed.

## 2.2. Why reading and writing skills are examined at BGCSE level excluding the speaking and listening skills

At the time the new BGCSE English Language was introduced, the plan was to assess reading and writing in the examinations, both internal and final examinations, while the other two, speaking and listening would be assessed by coursework and contribute towards the learners’ final mark as continuous assessment. However, up to now, assessment of the skills of speaking and listening through coursework has not happened because “it became apparent that the system was not ready . . .” and as result, it has never done. According to Ministry of Education (2000) BGCSE English Language teaching syllabus, that would have to wait until “facilities to do so are developed” (p.ii). Now one wonders where the facilities are or what has been done to develop those facilities thus far. Even the Ministry of Education (1999) assessment syllabus says “to assess those skills, which are not readily assessed by timed, written papers, such as speaking and listening, it is intended to introduce centre-based assessment coursework . . . and the marking will be externally moderated”(p.14) but none of these have happened. It is now almost twenty years but still no such facilities have been developed but the system continues to graduate learners in English at the BGCSE level that are assumed to be competent even in those skills that the syllabus does not assess.

## 2.3. Implications of non-assessment of speaking and listening skills in the BGCSE syllabus

The purpose of assessment is to provide information on whether teaching and learning has successfully taken place. Therefore, teachers need regular information on the development process of pupils’ knowledge, skills and understanding. This information is necessary for teachers to inform themselves on how to adjust their teaching and determine what kind of feedback is needed to improve learners’ performance. Learners too need to know their performance in all areas of learning and find ways of improving their results. However, the non-assessment of some skills such as speaking and listening may have potential demotivating effects as assessment. Parents equally need information on the progress of their children. Assessment helps them understand their children’s achievements and limitations. Lastly, policy makers, who have a duty to the public and as such must ensure that the curriculum delivers the intended results. Therefore, they have responsibilities to guard against any policies that negatively affect assessment. Such policies may include the non-assessment of speaking and listening skills at senior secondary school level.

This study asks this pertinent question: “what are the implications of the non-assessment of speaking and listening skills on the overall quality of the Botswana education? What does the non-assessment say about the Department of Curriculum and Evaluation’s assessment policy? Speaking and listening skills are important to learners as they achieve specific tasks of informing, persuading and solving problems. Therefore, if those skills are not assessed, the education system compromises students’ communication and critical thinking ability. These two skills also enhance students’ ability to meaningfully communicate their intentions in such instances as giving directions, asking for information, or even providing basic information in an emergency situation (Mead and Rubin, 1985). The listening, for instance, provides learners with high-order skills such as analysis and synthesis as well as understanding the tone of the speaker’s facial expressions, gestures and other non-verbal cues. The non-assessment of the skill means a student’s performance in that skill is not evaluated.

All in all, the ability to listen critically and express oneself clearly and effectively contributes to a learner’s success in school and later in life. As such developing and assessment of students’ speaking and listening skills is critical.

#### 2.4. Ways of assessing speaking and listening skills

There is no doubt that the four language skills are very important in learning English language. The assessment should focus on all of them. According to Powers (2010) ‘The four skills are strongly correlated...They are distinct enough, both logically and empirically, that they have to be measured separately’ (p.2). This section discusses the scenarios that are crucial in assessing speaking and listening skills at high school level. Although students in developing countries like Botswana have a certain level of competency in speaking and listening skills, there is a disparity in terms of their oral communication effectiveness. Those who are better communicators have a brighter future in the world of work and business environment. Therefore to ascertain that students thrive in future, the speaking and listening skills should be taught, practiced and assessed in the classroom. As Luoma (2004) puts it, there are certain factors a teacher has to consider on how well a student can perform in oral language skills and how oral testing instruments can be prepared. Therefore the method of assessing speaking and listening skills depends on the purpose of assessment. However, Mead and Rubin (1985) and Young et al. (2013) argue that a suitable method of assessing the language skills should conform to ‘measurement principle of reliability, validity and fairness’. In addition the instrument must be accurate, consistent and should measure abilities intended.

#### 2.5. How to assess speaking skills in the classroom

Mead and Rubin (1985) and Pan and Pan (2011) suggest two basic methods of assessing oral competence at high school level. That is, (a) the holistic scoring or observational approach and (b) the analytic scoring or structured approach. These methods have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of holistic scoring according to Davies et al. (1999) is that a student can be assessed quickly by more than one examiner and the disadvantage is that different examiners may choose to focus on different aspects of oral communication which could negatively affect the performance of the student. The analytic scoring, on the other hand, make

examiners focus on each aspect of the component to be assessed. They evaluate the same features of student oral communication competence as indicated by Nakamura (2004). The disadvantage is that the method is time consuming as stated by Davies et al. (1999).

### 2.5.1. The holistic scoring

In this approach the student's overall behaviour is observed and assessed. The speaking ability is combined into a single score. The assessment is fast and accurate based on the experience of the examiners. Experience plays an important role in providing a true reflection of the student oral communication performance (Underhill, 1987; Luoma, 2004; Pan and Pan, 2011). The main issue is that the student is assessed on his/her ability to realise a specific communication purpose. For example, persuading a listener or presenting on a particular topic of interest. The rubric for such kind of assessment is not detailed enough and captures the crucial aspects of the presentation.

**Table 1.** Rubric for holistic scoring

<b>Does not meet expectations</b>	<b>Needs improvement</b>	<b>Meet expectations</b>	<b>Exceeded expectations</b>
Errors frequently affect the listeners' ability to understand.	Many errors or occasional errors that interfere with listeners' ability to understand meaning.	Contains few errors but they do not interfere with the overall meaning of the presentation.	Essentially free of errors

The above rubric presents a summary of the overall elements that leads to scoring the student speaking ability but 'does not provide useful guidance for students to improve their speaking competence...students do not know why they succeed or fail since a single score does not allow to distinguish between various aspects of speaking such as control of syntax, depth of vocabulary, organisation and so on' (Tuan 2012, p.673).

### 2.5.2. Analytic scoring

This method, as stated earlier, focuses on breaking down the elements to be assessed in an oral presentation session. The assessor looks at the various areas during speaking and grades them separately. 'The procedure of this method involves the separation of the various features of a discourse into categories for scoring purpose' (Park 2004, p.1). Weigle (2002) noting Bachman and Palmer (1996) framework for test usefulness shows that this approach is more reliable, appropriate, provide more information about students' competence, although practically it is time consuming and expensive to implement. Categories and marks are used for assessment. The examiner may allocate marks in different ways depending on the emphases of the skill to be assessed. Such detailed rubric allows for a certain level of objectivity in assessing students. According to Allen (2014, p.6) the analytic scoring 'describes present skills and indicates what students should do to improve...reduce the time they (examiners) spend grading and eliminate the need to repeatedly write the same comments to multiple students'. In conclusion, both approaches use different rating systems,

the holistic scoring captures the general impression of the student performance while analytic scoring addresses the various aspects of student communication competence. According to Mead and Rubin (1985) a major aspect of any rating is rater objectivity: Is the rater (examiner) applying the scoring criteria accurately and consistently to all students?

## 2.6. How to assess listening skills in the classroom

Research shows that listening is an important skill and to improve it a student needs to practice and be assessed on it. 'Compared with other L2 skills of reading, writing and speaking, the field of listening is the youngest in terms of research' (Goh and Aryadoust 2016, p.6). At high school level there are basically three (3) distinct listening skills that could be tested. That is, (a) strategic listening, (b) specific listening and (c) critical listening. According to Mead and Rubin (1985) the questions must address different levels of literal and inferential understanding. These skills could further be broken down into sub-skills for listening so that the assessments chosen by the teacher are more specific. That is:

- 1- Listening for specific information
- 2- Listening for general information
- 3- Predictive listening
- 4- Inferential listening
- 5- Listening for pleasure
- 6- Intensive listening
- 7- Evaluative listening

The skills can be mastered by the students if they are followed by pre and post-listening activities in the classroom. These include material and resources that model student classroom and their environment language. 'Since listening performance is strongly influenced by motivation and memory, the passages should be interesting and relatively short. To ensure fairness, topics should be grounded in experience common to all students (Mead and Rubin, 1985). In addition, speaker factors like accent, intonation and testing environment must be clear of distractions. Listening assessment questions should be multiple-choice items or short answers that centre on the most important aspects of the listening comprehension passage. It is important to note that the ability to listen critically and speak fluently has a positive bearing in the student success in school and later in life. The methods used to assess speaking and listening skills should be based on the principles of reliability, validity and fairness, as alluded to earlier, to get the best out of the students.

## 3. Methodology

The study used two (2) qualitative research methods. According to Mack et al. (2011) 'the strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue...seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the population it involves' (p.1). These types of methods produce data or information that researchers interpret

using systematic methods of analysing trends and themes. The two methods that the researchers employed were the Questionnaire and interview.

### 3.1. Questionnaires

This method allowed researchers to collect data from teachers of English in four (4) Senior Secondary Schools located in the Central District in Botswana. That is, Lotsane Senior Secondary School in Palapye, Swaneng Hill School in Serowe, Madiba Secondary School in Mahalapye and Selibi Phikwe Secondary School in Selibi Phikwe. Forty-five (45) questionnaires were distributed among Senior Teachers and Teachers in the English Departments of the above mentioned schools. Forty-two (42) completed questionnaires were returned and they form the main basis of analysis contained in the next chapter. Their responses were clustered according to each question asked to identify patterns. This thematic analysis suits questions related to people's experiences, views and perceptions on issues that affect them.

### 3.2. Interviews

This qualitative data collection method is 'useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences (McNamara 1999, p.2). Four (4) officers responsible for English language assessment at Botswana Examination Council (BEC) were interviewed to give their perspectives on the non-assessment of speaking and listening skills at BGCSE level. That is, one (1) Principal examiner and three (3) Examiners.

## 4. 4. Data presentation and analysis

**Table 2.** Demographic information

Category					
<b>Gender</b>		Male	Female		
		<b>12</b>	<b>30</b>		
<b>Age</b>		26 - 30 years	31 - 35 years	36 - 40 years	41 and above
		-	-	<b>25</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Qualifications</b>		Diploma	Degree	Masters	PhD
		-	<b>42</b>	-	-

The demographic profile sort information about the gender, age and qualifications of the questionnaire respondents. Generally there are more females than males in the English departments from the sampled senior secondary schools. Their age range above 36 years which reflects some years of experience teaching and assessing BGCSE syllabus and finally they all have a degree qualification which is the minimum qualification required to teach at that level in Botswana.

#### 4.1. Responses from questionnaire

*Q1: The teaching of any language revolves around the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. In your teaching, do you give these skills the same attention/focus? Yes/No. Give a reason for your answer.*

Forty-five (45%) of the respondents stated that they give the four language skills the same attention during their teaching. The reasons they gave ranged from producing a well-rounded student; the skills help students to grasp concepts better and help to prepare students not only for the exam but for the world of work. One of the teachers stated that, *'focusing in all the skills created the much needed balance in the learning processes'*. Some of the teachers echoed that they try to focus in all the four skills but it is difficult as they are compelled to do more reading and writing activities. These teachers are doing what is in line with the BGCSE syllabus which emphasises the assessment of all the four language skills (Nkosana 2010). Why all the language skills are not assessed in the BGCSE syllabus will be addressed later in these analyses. Fifty-five (55%) of respondents on the other hand ticked *no* because they teach for exams and there is no need to focus on the skills that do not give results. One of the teachers stated categorically that, *'the syllabus does not examine them and emphases is placed on what is examined'*. Some teachers mentioned limited time for listening and speaking exercises and others expressed difficulty in teaching speaking and giving individual attention to a class with over 40 students. The Ministry of Education (2000) BGCSE English Language teaching syllabus alludes to development of facilities to make assessment of the speaking and listening skills achievable but almost twenty years has elapsed without much progress.

*Q2: If your answer is no, rank the skills according to the attention you give them, with 1 being the highest and 4 the lowest.*

Those who indicated *no* (55%) to question one were also asked to rank the skills according to the attention they give them. Majority ranked reading and writing skills highest and speaking and listening skills lowest. Their bone of contention is that the curriculum is designed to focus on reading and writing skills as mentioned earlier. Even the assessment syllabus states that facilities are not in place for speaking and listening skills to be assessed. One of the teachers summarized their ranking by stating that, *'assessment is aligned to reading and writing'* so it is paramount that they teach what is currently examined.

*Q3: Do you think all the 4 language skills should be given the same attention in the teaching and learning process? Yes/No. Give a reason for your answer.*

All the respondents (100%) agreed with the statement. They gave various reasons. They mentioned producing well-rounded secondary school graduates who are competent to express themselves. Others emphasized that the skills are necessary in the mastery of the language. One of the respondents stated that, *'the skills provide a conducive environment for acquisition of the language'*. The skills help students to be independent learners and contribute towards communication fluency. *'Neglecting one skill leads to the demise of others'* stated one of the senior teachers. One can conclude that teachers advocate for the four language



skills to be given the same attention in the BGCSE syllabus. For a student to effectively learn the English language, the skills should be taught and assessed equally. This will produce a learner who is proficient and competent in the English language.

*Q4: According to your understanding, what is the purpose of assessment?*

Two (2) respondents did not answer the question but those who responded stated the purposes of assessment according to their perspectives. The responses included, getting feedback, testing student understanding, checking if lesson objectives have been achieved, grading the students and for diagnostic purposes. The responses indicate that teachers are aware and know the purpose why they assess students. Checking if students understand the subject matter is very important in the teaching and learning process. Teachers need to understand the importance of assessment and which language skills to be taught and assessed in order to produce a well-rounded learner as mentioned earlier.

*Q5: Is the assessment in two skills (reading and writing) representative of a student's achievement in English language as a whole? Yes [ ] No [ ] don't know [ ]*

Yes	No
42	-

All the respondents (100%) feel assessing reading and writing skills only at BGCSE level does not represent the learner's achievement in English language as a whole. They stated that it is flawed and leads to production of semi-skilled graduates. It is inadequate and does not fully reflect student abilities in the language. One respondent stated that, *'it is not fair to some students who have a good command of expressing themselves'*. Another said assessing two skills only *'exclude performers who could do well in speaking and listening skills improve their final grade'*. In summary, teachers agree that there is a gap in student acquisition of vital skills in an English language classroom if the speaking and listening skills are excluded in BGCSE. Their non-assessment means they are not given the much needed attention during teaching and learning.

*Q6: What may be the implications of the non-assessment of the speaking and listening skills on the quality of students you teach?*

The question sorts the opinions of respondents on the implications of non-assessment of speaking and listening skills on their students. They stated that this created a challenge at tertiary level because quality is compromised. This affected their public speaking confidence and they also avoided speaking in English thus concentrating in reading and writing. One teacher stated that *'quality of student produced is compromised with the non-assessment of speaking and listening skills'*. The respondents echo the same sentiments of students being not articulate, confident and not well rounded in English language competence.

*Q7: In your opinion, what do you think may be the reason why speaking and listening are not assessed?*

The respondents did not refer to any policy document when answering this question. They assumed that the reasons could be lack of enough time and resources to include the speaking and listening skills in BGCSE assessments. Others mentioned lack of consultation between curriculum developers and teachers, and the difficulty of grading the two skills. Some teachers referred to challenges of speech and hearing impairment among some students as a hindrance towards effectively assessing the skills. On the other hand, teachers also questioned the logic behind assessing listening skill at junior certificate level but not at a higher level. In summary, teachers need to be consulted more on how best to assess speaking and listening skills at BGCSE.

*Q8: Suggest ways of assessing speaking skills in an English language classroom.*

The respondents were given an opportunity to suggest ways of assessing speaking skills only. Majority suggested short question and answer sessions, debate, public speaking, poetry and interview role play sessions. They stated the need to have a tool for assessing key areas in speaking. This agrees with Luoma (2004) who stressed the importance of developing oral testing instruments. The method of assessment according to Mead and Rubin (1985) should be reliable, valid and fair.

*Q9: Rank the following sub-skills for listening according to their importance in listening assessments. (a) being the most important and (g) being the least important.*

- 1- Listening for specific information
- 2- Listening for general information
- 3- Predictive listening
- 4- Inferential listening
- 5- Listening for pleasure
- 6- Intensive listening
- 7- Evaluative listening

The respondents were also asked to rank the skills for listening according to their importance in listening assessments. The results are as follows:

	<b>Listening skill</b>	<b>No of respondents</b>
(a)	Listening for general information	12
(b)	Listening for specific information	9
(c)	Intensive listening	7
(d)	Predictive listening	6
(e)	Evaluative listening	4
(f)	Inferential listening	2
(g)	Listening for pleasure	2

The respondents think students at BGCSE level should be taught and assessed on listening for general and specific information first before they tackle higher order listening assessment activities like evaluative and predictive listening. The important point according to Allen (2014) is to assess students and indicate to them which areas they need to improve on.

## 4.2. Responses from the oral interview instrument

Two (2) officers agreed with the teachers that the four language skills should be given the same attention in the teaching and learning process. Their reason being they are necessary skills to entrench competence in the English language. The other two (2) officers said *no* because of the current nature of BGCSE examination which assesses reading and writing skills only. All the four (4) interviewees also agreed that assessing reading and writing only at BGCSE does not represent the student's achievement as a whole. This supports Powers' (2010) assertion that the four language skills are strongly correlated and should be assessed separately. On the implications of non-assessment of the speaking and listening skills the examiners echoed that such scenarios produce *'half-baked graduates'* who lack proficiency and competence in the English language. One officer even said that, *'results (BGCSE) are not reflective of the learners overall capability in English'*. As regards the reasons why the speaking and listening skills are not assessed at BGCSE, they put the blame on curriculum department for not doing enough to ensure the skills are assessed. The officers were also asked to suggest ways of assessing the speaking skill and they suggested debate, presentations and radio lessons. They did not elaborate how these could be used in an English language lesson.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, when the BGCSE was introduced in the early 2000, the plan was to assess the four language skills but this has not happened because the system was and is not ready. Only the reading and writing skills are assessed. The reviewed literature identified the gap created by the non-assessment of these skills on the BGCSE graduates and the impact this will have on the learner's success in school and later in life. Two assessment methods were suggested for assessing these skills. That is, the holistic and analytical scoring. The data from respondents highlight the importance of the four language skills in producing a well-rounded learner but differed on the attention or focus they give the skills in the classroom. Some indicated that they try to focus on them during teaching and others indicated that they focus on reading and writing skills which are examined in the final examinations. The implications for not assessing these skills borders on producing graduates who are not well grounded in the English language. Practical assessment modalities like public speaking and debate, to mention but a few could be explored to close the gap of non-assessment of speaking and listening skills.

## 6. Recommendations

- 1- The study should be extended to Curriculum Department and the Ministry of Basic Education (MBE) to find out the challenges and interventions put in place to address the issue of non-assessment of speaking and listening skills at BGCSE.
- 2- Involve and train teachers on practical ways of assessing the speaking and listening skills at BGCSE level.
- 3- Intensify implementation of English speaking policies in Senior Secondary Schools.

- 4- Assign at least two (2) periods in a week for teachers and students to engage in speaking and listening activities.

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