



**TECHNIUM**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL**

**Vol. 30, 2022**

**A new decade  
for social changes**

[www.techniumscience.com](http://www.techniumscience.com)

ISSN 2668-7798



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## Criteria used in setting the English language component of the mature students' entrance examination questions in Ghana

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**Abstract.** The centrality of examinations to the understanding of competences and abilities of examinees across the globe cannot be overemphasised. The paper focused on exploring the criteria used in setting the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examination questions in Ghana. The qualitative design (specifically, multiple case study design) was employed for the paper. Using the multi-stage sampling technique, five Ghanaian universities were used for the paper. The data was elicited from in-depth interviews applied on the lecturers who set the English language component of the MSEE questions. [1] data analysis spiral plan was employed to analyse the data. The paper revealed that there were major weaknesses in the criteria used by the universities in areas such as training of the assessors, use of standard assessment models and consideration of test takers' characteristics. The paper advanced, to policy makers, suggestions such as the adoption of standard assessment models and the training of the assessors for the improvement of the examination<sup>2</sup>.

**Keywords.** Criteria; Mature Entrance Examination; English language; Ghana

### Introduction

Examinations play a central role and constitute activities that both educationists and learners have to participate in [2, 3]. Studies into the conduct of examinations are not in their infancy, as a number of scholars have proffered definitions for examinations [4, 5, 6]. [4] aver that examinations are procedures that are constructed to obtain information about the competency levels of learners. On his part, [5] defines examinations as a "method for measuring a person's ability, knowledge or performance in a given domain". [5] adds that a well-constructed examination is the instrument that measures test takers' competences within a particular field or domain accurately. [6] adds that 'a test is an event that is especially set up to elicit a performance (usually with a predetermined time frame) for the purpose of making judgments about a person's knowledge, skills or abilities'.

A crucial approach to understanding an examination is through the study of how aspects of the examination such as the criteria used in the setting of the questions, validity and reliability of the instrument, how the examination compares in respect of standards to analogous examination(s) and the nature and scope of the test items are handled by educationists [7, 8, 9,

10, 11, 12]. Studies on the criteria for setting English language examination questions exist [13, 14]. [13] provided a reference for teachers and researchers in second language writing and defined the construct of writing competence in a bid to provide teachers at all cadres of education with 'criteria' for writing assessment scales. [14] also sought to identify authentic target tasks, task phases and professionally significant assessment criteria for the Korean military English aviation assessment. Evidence from extant literature suggests that the Ghanaian situation, unfortunately, is not ideal. That is, research on the English language component of the MSEE that emphasise the criteria used in setting the examination questions are virtually non-existent. This constitutes a gap in the literature that needs to be filled in order to enhance the understanding of the examination in this respect and to ameliorate possible inherent weaknesses with the criteria used in setting the questions. Consequently, the paper focused on exploring the criteria used in setting the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examination questions in Ghana. The paper was guided by this research question: 1) what are the criteria used in setting the English language component of the MSEE questions?

In Anglophone West Africa, the West African Examinations Council's (WAEC) West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and its equivalents are used by universities to select candidates for placement into various undergraduate courses of study [15]. Another major conduit within the Ghanaian university system through which some candidates seek admission to pursue undergraduate programmes is the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations (MSEE). The MSEE is administered on university-specific basis. That is, each university sets its own questions based on its own standards. For individuals to be considered eligible for the MSEE, they must be twenty-five years or older and must have prior working experience in the fields that they aspire to study. Mostly, candidates are tested in three subjects – Mathematics, English language and a General Paper. Candidates who pass all three subjects are admitted into the mainstream undergraduate university system.

The rationale behind the conduct of this research is threefold. First, the paper addresses one the gaps existing in the Ghanaian university entrance examination landscape. Even though the English language component of the MSEE has seen significant patronage by most Ghanaian universities over two decades, there is virtually no study that has delved into the criteria on which the construct of the English language component of the MSEE questions is hinged. This paper, therefore, makes a vital contribution by highlighting the criteria that underlie the setting of the English language component of the MSEE questions. Second, as the first paper on the criteria that underlie the setting of the English language component of the MSEE questions in Ghana, this paper is aimed at providing the grounds for further studies to be conducted into other pertinent areas of the examination to provide a better understanding of the examination in order to improve identified weak areas or to maintain high standards already in practice. Last, an understanding of criteria that underlie the setting of the English language component of the MSEE questions will enable all relevant education stakeholders to develop and institute apposite policies that can improve the conduct of the English language component of the MSEE.

#### A. *Conceptual Underpinning*

[16] ESOL test development model underpinned this research. This is the model used by Cambridge to develop suites of proficiency and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) [17]. This model involves five phases that test developers must consider and go through before arriving at the appropriate test or high-quality test. The five phases are: planning phase, design phase, development phase, operational phase and monitoring phase. The

first phase deals fundamentally with the English language assessor determining the type of test/examination to use – proficiency, diagnostic, placement and achievement. Each of these tests performs a unique function, so it is crucial that a clear decision is made to engender the construct of the items. After determining the type of examination, the design phase sets in to allow the language assessor to determine the replicability of the examination. The language assessor must then give an in-depth explanation of the examination and trial, analyse, review and revise it. Additionally, this phase requires that the physical, psychological and experiential features of the candidates be considered.

The third phase is the test development phase. Here, crucial parameters for testing particular language skills must be adopted. The model suggests four of these language competences – Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing. For the testing of Reading, some of the factors are: text source, discourse type, domain, topic, length, vocabulary, grammar, text structure. With respect to Listening, some of the factors are: number of participants, text speed, accent, pronunciation and number of times played. Regarding Speaking, some of the factors are: possible modes of delivery, an interlocutor frame designed to ensure that each administration of a test has similar response conditions so that the references made are comparable across learners and the types of rating skills required. Pertaining to Writing, some of the parameters are: modes of delivery available, types of elicitation task, response formats and scoring criteria [16]. The operational phase fundamentally deals basically with the test administration. Any violations of the instructions aimed at ensuring the smooth administration of the test can negatively affect the validity of the test scores. Any problems that the test developer might have ignored at the previous stage can be observed at this stage. In order to further enhance the examination and maintain high standards, the monitoring phase, which is a comprehensive review of all the previously explained phases, is carried out. This process, which must be on-going at all times, is ultimately aimed at evaluating the question setting process and revising aspects which may be identified to need improvement. The model was modified to make it more suitable for the research because the research did not consider the administration (operational phase) of the questions, but rather concentrated on the criteria used in setting the English language component of the MSEE questions.

### **Methods**

This qualitative inquiry employed the multiple case study design. The multiple case study is conducted when the enquirer focuses on a phenomenon and selects multiple cases/sites to study it [18]. In conducting multiple case studies, the enquirer investigates the phenomenon by replicating the procedures across all the selected cases [19]. The target population comprised the lecturers who set the English language component of the MSEE questions. The total number of universities and degree awarding institutions in Ghana is ninety-nine (99), comprising 18 public universities (10 comprehensive universities and 8 technical universities) and 81 private universities which are largely comprehensive [20].

The multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 6 lecturers (each representing a particular university) who set the English language component of the MSEE questions. The first stage of the process involved putting of the various universities into three quotas, namely: public (comprehensive 10; technical 8) and private comprehensive (81). At the second stage of the selection process, two universities were purposively selected from each of the three groups, yielding a total of six universities. For the third stage, there was a purposive selection of a lecturer each from each of the selected universities. An interview guide was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with the five lecturers who set the English language component of

the MSEE questions (the original intent was to interview a lecturer from Comprehensive University 2, but this university turned down the request, so the analysis is based on the five universities that consented). In the interview guide, specific areas such as whether the universities have any assessment model that they follow in setting the questions, whether they consider the type of examination to inform the construct of the test items, whether they consider the characteristics of the test takers in the design of the questions and whether they pre-trial the questions before administration were explored. Field notes were also taken as a backup to the audio recordings done during all the five interview sessions.

Pertaining to the conduct of the interviews, visitations were made to the selected universities. Rapport was created between the researchers and the individual interviewees in order to ensure that the atmosphere was relaxed to allow for a free flow of ideas, since all the interviews were conducted on a face-to face basis. Prior to the commencement of each interview, the Informed Consent Form and the Participant Information Sheet were given to the interviewees to offer explanation to them as regards the nature and scope of the research. The interviewees were required to sign the informed consent form as evidence of their assent to partake in the research. Each interview lasted approximately thirty (30) minutes. In order to ensure the selected universities' right to anonymity, pseudonyms (Technical University 1, Technical University 2, Comprehensive University 1, Private University 1 and Private University 2) were used for them throughout the research.

[1] analysis spiral plan was used to analyse the responses from the semi-structured interviews. As illustrated in Figure 1, the spiral loop 'A' involves organising the data. In 'A', the elicited data were compiled and disintegrated into smaller units. Loop 'B', which is the perusal stage, allowed the researchers to glean meaningful concepts and ideas from the data and additionally make preliminary interpretations of the data. For Loop "C", which is the classification stage, the data were further grouped into categories, themes and sub-themes, all of which were based on interpretations derived from the codes. For the synthesis stage (Loop 'D'), the data were integrated and summarised and synthesised with existing empirical literature at the discussion stage of this paper.

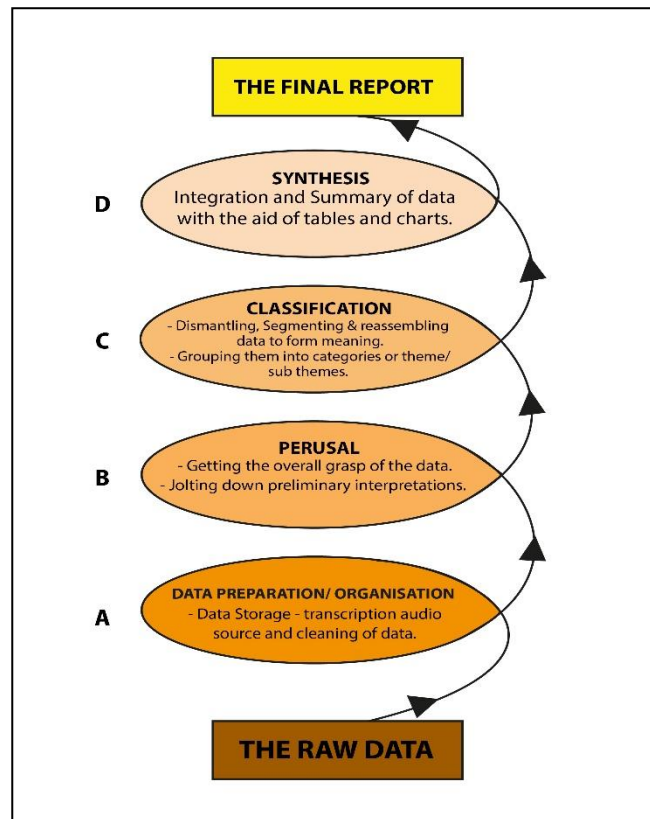


Fig. I Analysis spiral plan [1]

## Results and Discussion

The remainder of this paper highlights the criteria that the universities use to set the English language component of the MSEE questions. Specifically, seven thematic areas were identified, and the details are presented in this section.

*RQ: What Are the Criteria Used in Setting the English Language Component of The MSEE Questions?*

One key way of ensuring examinations quality is through the use of standardised examinations question setting criteria. In this direction, aspects of [16] ESOL test development model guided the exploration of the MSEE question setting criteria.

### *Processes Followed to Set Questions*

Universally, one very important aspect of language assessment is the processes followed to set the questions. In order to understand the situation, the examiners were asked to indicate the processes they follow to set the English language component of the MSEE questions.

The examiner from Technical University 1 stated that:

*“Ideally, institutions should have parameters that should guide examiners in setting questions, but we do not have a formal plan like that or any formal standard, so it falls on the examiner to design a system... I expect people who are coming in to be able to articulate their expertise. In effect, we are looking at the four communicative areas – Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing, but the exam takes care mainly of speaking parts and the other parts are incorporated into the written aspects.”*

It is evident that there was no standardised process that the university prescribed, so it was entirely left to the discretion of the examiner to set the questions. This assertion is made based on the examiner’s own admission that ideally, institutions ought to have such formalised processes to be followed by examiners, but that such a situation was non-existent in Technical University 1. The lack of a consistent or standardised process to guide the setting of the questions leaves room for possible errors which can be inimical to the standards of the examinations.

The examiner of Technical University 2 mentioned that:

*“The University doesn’t have...what I do is because for so many years I have been setting the questions, I follow the same routine. There are two aspects of the paper – the essay column and the comprehension or the summary column, so I find any passage for them...you see, I have a book on comprehension and summary, so what I do is that I normally pick some of the passages... I just go into that book, I pick one of the passages at random and then I use it for the second part of the paper. And then for the first part, that is the essay column, that one I use my discretion. If there is any issue that is being discussed around the country, then, of course, I use that one, and I find two other areas either on descriptive essay, narrative essay, expository or argumentative. The essence is just to test the students’ proficiency in how they use language to express themselves.”*

The response suggests that Technical University 2 does not have a standardised process in place to guide the examiner in the setting of the questions. Evidently, this situation leaves this very crucial examination entirely in the hands of the examiner. Since the required checks and balances needed, had there been a standardised process, are likely not to be present, the likelihood that there will be identifiable lapses in the examinations are obvious. For instance, the examiner talks about ‘just’ selecting passages ‘at random’ to set the comprehension and summary aspects of the examination. The choice of words here is even suggestive of a pedestrian approach to selecting what is supposed to be used in testing the candidates of this crucial placement examination. This raises concerns about the overall standards of the examination questions set by Technical University 2 over the three-year period.

For Private University 1, the examiner revealed that:

*“I do it alone...it’s guided by the syllabus for the programme, and the programme, we cover, at least, about eight topics. Usually, we select just about six to fashion out the questions...the syllabus covers areas on*

*punctuation, concord, faulty sentences, comprehension, paragraph writing, essay writing, sense relations and basic English skills. I set three different questions then I take it[sic] for internal moderation under the supervision of one moderator. Then we discuss before we take it[sic] for external moderation for it to be crosschecked, and, then based on that, we decide on which one to use for the exam.”*

This response suggests that there is an identifiable process in place for Private University 1. The existence of a syllabus that serves as a guide in the setting of the questions and the use of both internal and external moderation, to a large extent, will ensure that possible individual lapses that may occur in the questions are controlled to ensure good standards of the questions.

In Private University 2, it was mentioned that:

*“A number of English lecturers set the questions and then there is a selection. After that it should go for moderation. That’s one key thing we do. We have lecturers who deal with moderating the questions, so they should have it, at least, a week or more so that it can be moderated.”*

Regarding Private University 2, it is evident that there is a definable process which is followed in setting the questions. Obviously, gathering a pool of questions, selecting test items from this pool of questions and subjecting the selected items to internal moderation gives enough room for cross-fertilisation of ideas. This situation is ideal in two senses: (1) potential lapses in the questions will be reduced, if not eliminated and (2) the University has an identifiable pattern it follows in the setting of the questions.

For Comprehensive University 1, the examiner revealed that:

*“There’s serious confidentiality involved in the exams...people do not know that I set any questions. That is the system the Provost there has set right from the beginning. Three months to the time, he writes to appoint you. There is a book that is used in running programmes for those who want to write the mature exams...a book written by a team in the University. You are given a copy of the book which is an examination guide... then you look at the various topics that are treated in the book. In the composition, you have argumentative essays, expository essays...narrative essays...descriptive essays...then topics in grammar – synonyms and antonyms, parts of speech, elements of literature. So, from then, you now set the questions, and you submit the questions to the Provost, at least, about a month to the time.”*

The response here implies that Comprehensive University 1 has a well-defined process in place that guides the setting of the questions. Specifically, dates with respect to the appointment of examiners, setting of the questions and submission of the questions are followed timeously. Apart from these, that the examiner’s identity is shrouded in secrecy, that there is a university standard book that serves as an examination guide and that the examiner follows the

guide fully in selecting the topical areas or competences to test are positive. Such a situation engenders, to a large extent, better quality of the examination questions as set by this examiner.

In summary, it is clear that the Universities considered in this research follow different paths with respect to the processes involved in setting the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examination questions – a situation that is not standard. The major deviation was registered for Technical University 1 and Technical University 2 who appeared not to know what they were about. Considering that this a crucial examination because it is used to admit potential candidates to handle higher learning tasks, leaving aspects of the examinations entirely in the hands of examiners has the potential of affecting the overall quality of the examination. As [21] aver, having a standard process for all universities is key to improving the standards of the examinations.

#### *Use of An Assessment Model*

As the IELTS uses [16] ESOL test development model to help ensure and maintain high standards of the examination, the situation as pertains in the universities used in this inquiry was explored. In this direction, the examiners were asked to indicate if they followed any assessment model in setting the English language component of the MSEE questions.

The examiner of Technical University 1 responded that:

*“(Laughs) A formal model, no! So it’s up to the individual ...I have to explore, so I research other similar examinations...I like to use international standards...I explore their areas, and then I try and see how I can redesign such to suit our candidates and environment...if we were doing things right, and if we had a system, the system would be able to guide the examiner...but we don’t have.”*

At Technical University 2, the examiner stated that:

*“No. I don’t do that...I don’t really follow any particular model per se.”*

With respect to Private University 1, the examiner also mentioned that:

*“Not really such defined model ...that this is what you should do in that sense.”*

Also, the examiner of Private University 2 stated that:

*“From my end, I cannot pinpoint a specific module.”*

In Comprehensive University 1, it was revealed that:

*“They have not had any model. But I am in the area of assessment...so I use my background knowledge as an assessor, so you know what pertains in terms of examining.”*

Evidence from the respondents suggests that there is no language assessment model that is followed in all the universities to guide in the setting of the questions. Again, it is evident that the examiner from Technical University 1 admitted to the need for such a model to guide how the questions are set, albeit this examiner had not made any attempt to identify a particular model to follow. It is, therefore, safe to claim that the questions were set in an unclear manner in the absence of the use of a standardised model across the universities. This finding leaves a lot to be desired since there is enough room for possible lapses to occur in the setting of the questions – a situation that has the propensity of affecting the quality of the English language component of the MSEE questions. As [16] argues, by systematically following a model such as the ESOL test development model, examiners can be confident that they have developed a high-quality assessment that will provide reliable and useful information about their learners. That, unfortunately, is not prevalent in the English language component of the MSEE in the selected Ghanaian universities.

#### *Consideration of Type of Examination in The Construct of Questions*

Examinations do not fulfil just a sole function; the objective(s) of examinations often determine how a particular instrument is designed to help achieve that particular objective(s) [22, 16]. Considering the fact that the English language component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations is primarily a placement test, this domain was explored. The respondents were asked if they considered the type of examination to inform the construct of the questions, and, if so, how they went about it.

According to the examiner of Technical University 1:

*“Yes, I consider that...the person is going to the classroom to read...so I look for reading comprehension...the person has to demonstrate a higher level of understanding of issues from the individual perspective as well as the general. They have to also be able to use language because they will write...so I deal with usage too, so the examinations fall in these parts.”*

The examiner of Technical University 2 revealed that:

*Not really. You know the essence of this whole thing is that the students that are coming to write should have gone through formal education, especially the second cycle, so with that idea, you expect that certain students coming to write this exam should have gone through certain little basics of language training, so that is all what we actually consider. Beyond that, we don't really follow anything per se. I don't follow any serious processes like that.”*

Also, for Private University 1, it was mentioned that:

*“That's yes (laughs and looks confused), but it's largely dependent on the decision of the supervisor...it's with the supervisor...the one supervising the programme...sometimes understanding, comprehension, analysing literal and inferential meanings...basic writing skills in that sense.”*

The situation as prevalent in Private University 2 was that:

*“We have to prove that they have a certain level of competence when it comes to language. That’s a key thing. We look at how they are able to compose essays, how they are able to organise ideas, how they are able to argue. All these things are considered because we know that where you want to go is more tougher[sic] than the SHS, so we look at these things in setting the questions.”*

For Comprehensive University 1, it was revealed that:

*“Exactly, we do that...we consider that very seriously in setting the questions so that questions or test items should be able to differentiate a good student from a bad student so that discrimination will be very clear for us to know who to pick...because it’s for selection, we are very particular about the difficulty level, so the difficulty level is at the SHS level (WASSCE) because that’s the standard exam for selecting people for universities.”*

Apart from the examiner of Technical University 2 who stated categorically that the University does not consider the type of examination to inform the construct of the questions and that of Private University 1 whose position was ambivalent, it is clear that the other examiners knew what they were about. That is, they took decisions on the type of questions and language competences based on the fact that the examination is primarily a placement or selection examination. The situation at Private University 1 was that of ambivalence, as the examiner was unable to convincingly respond in the area of what exactly was done in respect of this subject matter. That the majority of the respondents considered the type of examination in the setting of the questions is a positive finding that is in consonance with the posits of Berry (2018). This author suggests that, as part of standard language assessment practice, examiners ought to consider the type of examination in the development of the questions or test items. However, there is more to be done in this area for Technical University 2 and Private University 1 since their position largely is in opposition to the posits of [16].

#### *Consideration of Test Takers’ Characteristics*

As part of the approaches followed to set examination questions is the consideration of the characteristics of the test takers in order to arrive at questions that are suitable or fitting for the test takers [16]. This domain was, therefore, explored to identify if the respondents considered the characteristics of the test takers and, if they did, the particular characteristics they considered.

The examiner of Technical University 1 stated that:

*“Yes, definitely. The first year that I did the questions I had a shock because I had very high expectations of these people...but the exam proved me wrong...these are people who have not learnt for a long time. They may have the experiences, but handling the classroom environment is a problem...I look at their professional background and the age in setting the questions.”*

This response suggests that this examiner, perhaps, is not setting the questions to the required standards, considering that the test takers' characteristics such as age, professional background and period spent out of school have an effect on the way the test takers are able to handle the questions. That the characteristics of the test takers are taken into considering is a positive finding, since it makes the questions fitting and suitable for the test takers [16]. On the reverse, the likelihood that these questions are not set to the expected standards is not desirable.

For that of Technical University 2, it was mentioned that:

*"I will say yes and no. To some extent, my major preoccupation is to observe that at that time they should have some basics of language training. Most of these people, it's been a long time they went to school, but the fact is that you expect them to have gone through second cycle as per the NCTE requirement. They should be more than 25 years. They should have some work experience. So we consider these three things."*

Even though this respondent was rather ambivalent initially as to whether the characteristics of the test takers are considered, the mid-to-latter part of the response suggested that the period the test takers have spent out of school, their minimum age requirement and their working experience are considered in the setting of the questions. The worrying aspect of this is that, this examiner, being the main person in charge of setting the questions should have been able to categorically state that, indeed, the characteristics of the test takers are considered or not. That the examiner was unable to do this, perhaps, suggest that the characteristics of the test takers may, after all, not be a key issue considered in the setting of the questions. This situation contradicts standard language assessment practice [16].

The Private University 1 examiner revealed that:

*"Not necessarily because the common characteristic about them is they are all workers...they are all over 25 years...the work differences do not matter in that sense because you have people from varied backgrounds."*

It is evident from this response that although this examiner is fully aware of the defining characteristics of the test takers, such defining characteristics are overlooked in the setting of the questions. This situation is not desirable since the questions set may not be fitting enough for the test takers and therefore affect decisions that will be made on the examination results – a situation [16] does not ascribe to.

On the part of the examiner of Private University 2, the situation was that:

*"Generally, we have students from varying backgrounds, but we usually have the standardised thing so we don't...we look at the standard...at the same time, I look at their age not to give them a lot of recalling questions that may be challenging for them."*

This response indicates that this examiner's intention is to set the questions with the intention of arriving at standard questions by not considering the characteristics of the test

takers. Meanwhile, the literature suggests that standard questions must be set with the characteristics of the test takers in mind. It was, therefore, comforting that the examiner admitted to considering their age. However, the age consideration suggests that the expected approaches used in assessing the test takers' competences are compromised. Consequently, this examiner appears not to be practicing the best ways of arriving at standardised yet suitable questions for the test takers. This situation contradicts standard language assessment practice [16].

Also, the examiner of Comprehensive University 1 revealed that:

*"It's considered. I look at their nature before setting the questions so that I can differentiate between the good student and the bad student and be able to pick the cream of the students...sometimes I look at their academic ability."*

For this examiner, the only concern is to get candidates who are academically good to handle higher learning tasks. Issues such as age and professional background which are common characteristics of the test takers are not mentioned. Consequently, consideration of the characteristics of the test takers in this University is not something that is practiced holistically.

All in all, as [16] mentions in the ESOL test development model, the physical, psychological and experiential characteristics of the test takers should be considered in language assessment. As evidenced from the responses elicited from the examiners of these universities, it is obvious that even though some of the examiners made attempts to consider the characteristics of the test takers, their attempts are not satisfactory. This situation, again, casts doubt over the authenticity of the English language component of the MSEE questions used by the selected universities.

#### *Pre-Trial of Questions*

According to [16] ESOL test development model, one of the crucial activities that language assessors need to observe in the preparation of the examination questions is to pre-trial the questions. This is done with the view of identifying possible lapses in the examination questions so that the appropriate corrections can be made in order to arrive at the desired questions for a particular examination. This domain was, therefore, explored in this inquiry in order to identify whether the respondents pre-trial the questions, and, if they did, how they went about it.

The examiner of Technical University 1 stated that:

*"No, and that doesn't happen because of the absence of formal parameters and timing because the Department gets the information (to set the questions) at the very tail end of the process...sometimes a week, sometimes, days...there's not adequate time for pretrial."*

For Technical University 2, it was mentioned that:

*"No. Apparently, I sometimes recycle these questions, so, to some extent, I'll say that they have been pre-trialed because sometimes a passage I actually used six years ago, I bring the same passage, and, then, some of the essay*

*questions, I just change the wording, but technically it's the same question, so I'll say they've gone through the pre-trial stage."*

Also, in Private University 1, the examiner responded that:

*"Not so, not so. We don't do such a thing."*

Similarly, the examiner from Private University 2 revealed that:

*"No, no...as a university, we don't do that."*

However, the examiner of Comprehensive University 1 stated that:

*"I do my pre-trial, I do that. It's not a very large scale. Because it's a mature exam, I try it on maybe one or two students who have completed the SHS and also I know are not writing the mature exam. And I do it at a time they are not expecting there will be any mature exam...I trial it to see how they'll respond before I submit it as a question."*

Apart from the examiner of Comprehensive University 1 who admitted to conducting pre-trial of the questions to establish the veracity or otherwise of the questions so that, if necessary, appropriate corrections can be made to improve upon the questions, the examiners of the other universities did not exercise this crucial language assessment activity at all. This means there is always room for lapses to occur with respect to the nature and even scope of the questions. This lacuna casts doubts over the veracity of the questions used by these universities because pre-trialing, which constitutes a major language assessment quality assurance activity, is ignored. As [16] indicates in the ESOL test development model, pre-trial is one of the key activities that language assessors must undertake in the assessment process.

#### *Review of Question-Setting Process*

[16] ESOL test development model prescribes reviews of the question-setting process. Closely linked to the pre-trial of questions is the review of the entire question-setting procedure over periods of time in order to identify if all aspects of the process are desirable. Undesirable aspects can then be identified and improved upon. This crucial language assessment domain was, consequently, explored to identify whether the question-setting process of the English language component of the MSEE into the selected universities are reviewed, and if yes, how it is executed.

The examiner of Technical University 1 revealed that:

*"Yes. As I said, because there is no opportunity for pre-trial, you need to look at the performance so the performance (of the test takers) direct me to go through the questions to determine what works and what doesn't work...so sometimes the content changes."*

For Technical University 2, the response was:

*“Sure. What I have realised is that most of them ignore issues of topical concerns that I use. They come to the examination room without any idea at all...so most of them, even though you have topical questions, they don’t attempt that one[sic]. They go with the simple questions, but I have made some compulsory before, and the failure rate was massive, so I put it there, but I don’t make it compulsory.”*

With respect to Private University 1, the examiner mentioned that:

*“Yes, please...that even informs the way the questions are asked...we use previously set questions to inform us on the ways to improve the next questions.”*

For Private University 2, it was revealed that:

*“Of course, we do. We look at some of the questions... if they ask for just simple things, we decide that such questions shouldn’t be used because the focus is to test their competence.”*

Pertaining to Comprehensive University 1, the examiner stated that:

*“Yes, I try to do that...every year, after they have written the exams, we look at the questions as a team...we have formed a group called Team Leaders...we look at the nature of the questions to see whether there are some loopholes or any problems associated with them... we look at the scripts...we also consider students’ answers against the questions and expected answers to see if there are any weaknesses so that the following year, we can improve upon these.”*

All universities responded in the affirmative, albeit the review processes were different for the universities. Whereas some looked at it from the individual narrow scale, one looked at it from a more comprehensive and thorough perspective (Comprehensive University 1). Even though most of the approaches used are not comprehensive and as thorough as should be, it is positive that all of the examiners appreciated the need for such a key step in the language assessment process and that modest attempts, by and large, were in place to effect this important language assessment step. This positive finding is in consonance with the postulations of [16] who prescribes that the entire question-setting process should be reviewed to highlight possible areas that may need strengthening.

#### *Training of Examiners in Language Assessment*

Universally, another crucial aspect of language assessment is the competences of the language assessor, so this domain was explored. A well-trained language assessor is better placed to examine language test takers better than one who is not well-trained. An attempt was, therefore, made to find out whether the examiners of the English language component of the MSEE have received some training in language assessment by their employers or not.

The examiner of Technical University 1 revealed that:

*“No...formal, no. I just explore...that’s a minus for the institution...people who are handling language should be (trained), but we don’t have that.”*

For Technical University 2, the response was:

*“No, no, no...personally, once by the Linguistics Association of Ghana. That’s four years ago.”*

With respect to Private University 1, the examiner mentioned that:

*“Yes. We received some trainers from University of Cape Coast to take us through what is expected in language assessment...there was a lecturer who was doing it (setting the questions), and she had to leave, so she gave me some sort of in-house training before the Cape Coast people came.”*

For Private University 2, it was revealed that:

*“On language assessment, I don’t remember attending any such training.”*

Pertaining to Comprehensive University 1, the examiner stated that:

*“The University runs courses for all lecturers in evaluation and language assessment. We do that very consciously. We look at how to write essay-type tests...how to write objective-type tests.”*

The responses here suggest that only Private University 1 and Comprehensive University 1 train their language examiners on language assessment. The opposite was the case for the other universities. It was expected, as universities handling such a serious selection examination such as the English language component of the MSEE, that the key players who are the examiners would be equipped to have the requisite know-how to be able to set standard questions fit for their purpose. Unfortunately, three of the five universities (who constitute the majority) failed in this regard. It is, therefore, not surprising that a lot of key areas that [16] prescribes as necessary for language assessors to observe and practice are ignored. This, ultimately, has the propensity of affecting the quality of the questions that are set.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of the inquiry was to explore the criteria used in setting the English language component of the Mature Students’ Entrance Examination questions in Ghana. The qualitative design (specifically, multiple case study design) was employed for the paper. Using the multi-stage sampling technique, five Ghanaian universities were used for the research. The data was elicited from in-depth interviews applied on the lecturers who set the English language component of the MSEE questions. Based on the main findings, seven key conclusions were drawn. The general conclusion is that the criteria used by the universities to set the questions were not desirable. That is, the criteria used by these universities fell short of key practices that could aid the setting of more fitting questions for the English language component of the MSEE.

This is in opposition to the position of [16] ESOL test development model which suggests a clear standardised process to English language question setting.

Specifically, the conclusions are that, first, the universities followed different processes to set the English language component of the MSEE questions; no standard process was identified for any of the universities. Second, the process of setting the English language component of the MSEE questions was left entirely in the hands of the examiners of these universities. Third, none of the universities followed any language assessment model to guide them in the setting of the English language component of the MSEE questions. Furthermore, most of the universities considered the fact that the English language component of the MSEE is a placement examination, and that informed how they set the questions. Only Technical University 2 and Private University 1 deviated from this positive practice. In addition, even though some of the examiners made attempts to consider the characteristics of the test takers in the setting of the English language component of the MSEE questions, their attempts were not desirable. More so, except for Comprehensive University 1, none of the other universities pre-trialed their questions to establish the veracity or otherwise of the questions. This means there is always room for lapses to be identified. Additionally, all universities reviewed their questions and the process of setting them over particular periods to identify if there were possible lapses so that those lapses, if found, could be addressed. The review processes were, however, different for the universities. Finally, apart from Private University 1 and Comprehensive University 1 that train their language examiners on language assessment, the other universities did not offer any form of training to position the examiners to perform better in their assigned duty.

### **Recommendations**

The researchers proffer the following recommendations to improve the criteria used in setting the English language component of the MSEE. First, the universities should consider placing emphasis on regularly training their examiners on language assessment. Until this is done, the many defects detected in the English language component of MSEE will be prevalent. The trainings should also be evaluated by these universities regularly to ensure that the right language assessment practices taught these examiners are implemented in order to ensure that the overall standards of the English language component of MSEE have been improved. Second, the English language component of MSEE should be quality assured. That is, the entire process from planning to evaluation of the examinations must be monitored closely by these universities to ensure that: (1) the right language testing approaches are adhered to by the examiners and (2) all possible lapses are detected and ameliorated with speed. Last, the universities should consider adopting a standard language assessment model. This will be a key guarantee to ensuring that proper language assessment standards are practiced to the letter in order to improve upon the overall standards of the English language component of MSEE. In this direction, [16] ESOL test development model will come in handy.

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