Representation of Language Skills in English Language Assessments: A Macro-Level Case Study

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Abstract
This study examined the representation of language skills in Secondary school English language examinations in Tanzania. The study employed the descriptive case study design. The study used five English examinations from 2017 to 2021, a table of specification, and English language syllabus for Secondary School form i-iv (2010) as sources of data. Data analysis involved the descriptive statistics. Based on the findings, the study concluded that the representation of language skills in the national examinations is heavily skewed towards productive skills, particularly writing while listening and speaking are entirely excluded. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on writing and a reliance on multiple-choice questions for reading, with no effort to assess oral skills. These findings highlight the need for a more inclusive and skill-balanced approach to English language assessment in the national examinations. The examination framework should be revised to include all four language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking—to ensure a balanced evaluation and alignment with communicative language teaching principles. Varied and task-based question formats should be incorporated, including audio-based and oral interaction tasks, to enhance authenticity and more accurately assess students' overall language proficiency. Clear benchmarks should be established to ensure the consistent inclusion of all language skill areas each year. Additionally, standardized weighting should be introduced for each skill, with particular emphasis on underrepresented areas, such as listening and speaking, to promote balanced and sustained coverage across assessments.

Keywords: Assessment; Summative assessment; Language skills; Content validity.

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Introduction

Language skills are essential in assessing students' proficiency in English, particularly in summative assessments that evaluate the overall competence and inform educational decisions (Bachman, 2004). These assessments are designed to measure various language skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the representation of these skills in summative assessments is not always balanced, which may influence the accuracy and fairness of the evaluation process (McNamara, 2000). Often, certain skills are prioritized over others, reflecting assumptions about what aspects of language proficiency are most important in specific educational contexts (Alderson, 2000). For example, reading and writing skills may be overrepresented due to their emphasis in academic settings, while speaking and listening skills may receive less attention, despite their importance in communicative competence (Green, 2013). This

situation raises critical questions about the effectiveness and fairness of such assessments, particularly in diverse educational systems, where language demands vary widely.

Given the increasing global importance of English proficiency and the central role of summative assessments in shaping educational outcomes, this study analyzed the representation of language skills in English language summative assessments. By examining how these assessments align with the Tanzanian English language syllabus for secondary schools (Form I-IV, 2010), the study sought to identify any disparities and offer recommendations for improving the inclusivity and accuracy of language assessments. The findings provide valuable insights for linguists, educators, policymakers, and assessment designers.

Language Skills and Their Interconnectedness
In linguistics, the four primary language skills reading, listening, writing, and speaking are understood as interconnected components that collectively shape an individual's language proficiency. Powers (2010) emphasized that a comprehensive assessment of English proficiency must evaluate all four skills, as they are interrelated and work together in real-world communication. Testing a specific skill, such as speaking, without assessing related skills like listening may not provide an accurate representation of an individual's ability. Listening, for example, influences speaking by helping individuals process pronunciation, structure and meaning while writing can reinforce speaking by encouraging coherent, grammatically correct language production. However, while these skills are strongly correlated, they are not perfectly interchangeable. A holistic approach to assessment, which considers all language skills, offers a more accurate and nuanced picture of proficiency, supporting the idea that language acquisition and use are complex and multidimensional (Powers, 2010).

Summative Assessment
In Tanzania, quality assurance for curriculum and examinations is managed by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) and the National Examination Council of Tanzania (NECTA). NECTA, established by Parliament Act No. 21 of 1973, is responsible for national examinations while TIE oversees curriculum design and development. Together, TIE and NECTA ensure that teaching, learning and assessment align with current educational theories. However, macro-

level summative assessment is primarily guided by the syllabus and the table of specifications. The English Language Curriculum for Secondary Schools (2005), revised in 2010, emphasizes the importance of communicative skills and an integrated approach to learning and assessment. This curriculum highlights the need for assessments to reflect a range of language skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the implementation of this curriculum in summative assessments does not always align with the stated goals, especially in the context of the prevailing emphasis on reading and writing skills in academic assessments.

The Role of Communicative Language Teaching
Tanzania adopted the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in 2005, which prioritizes the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The secondary education curriculum aims to develop students' language proficiency in both Swahili and English. The CLT approach emphasizes the communicative competence over linguistic structures and encourages students to use language effectively for communication, both spoken and written (Richard & Rogers, 2001).

As part of this approach, the curriculum stresses the importance of assessing all four skills, not just in isolation but as interconnected components of language proficiency. Research by Power (2010) supports the view that effective language assessments must consider all four skills. The four skills are moderately correlated but not interchangeable. For instance, listening and reading skills play a critical role in improving speaking and writing abilities. It is, therefore, essential that summative assessments incorporate speaking and listening, alongside reading and writing, to provide a meaningful evaluation of language proficiency.

Challenges and Content Validity
Despite the emphasis on communicative competence in the Tanzanian curriculum, summative assessments often fall short of adequately reflecting the diverse language skills students are expected to master. Content validity, defined as the extent to which a test represents the skills and knowledge it is intended to measure (Filcher & Davidson, 2007), is a crucial factor in ensuring that assessments align with educational objectives. When language skills are underrepresented in assessments, they fail to

capture important aspects of proficiency, making it difficult for NECTA and other stakeholders to gauge what students have learned accurately. The representation of language skills in summative assessments must therefore reflect the goals outlined in the curriculum. In Tanzania, the alignment between the syllabus content and examination content is essential for ensuring the validity of assessments. This alignment helps determine whether students are being adequately prepared for real-world communication, where all language skills are required in tandem.

This study examined the representation of language skills in English language summative assessments at the macro-level in Tanzania. By analyzing how well assessments align with curriculum objectives, the study provides insights into the adequacy of current assessment practices. The findings underscore the need for a more balanced representation of all four language skills in summative assessments to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of students' language proficiency. This will help ensure that assessments are designed to provide an accurate reflection of students' abilities and that they meet the objectives of the English language curriculum. By understanding how language skills are represented in summative assessments, this study offers valuable information to educators, policymakers, and assessment designers. It highlights the importance of ensuring that assessments cover a representative sample of the curriculum content and reflect the multidimensional nature of language proficiency.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design and methods employed. The choice of methodology is grounded in the nature of the research problem and the specific goals of the current study, which require an in-depth understanding of study and measurable data to draw conclusions. The methods used for data collection, sampling and analysis are detailed below, with an emphasis on their appropriateness for addressing the study and ensuring the robustness of the results.

Design
The study employed the descriptive case study design, which is particularly appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration and detailed examination of the various ways in which language skills are represented and assessed in English language testing. This design enabled a thorough understanding of specific features, patterns and nuances of the assessment process, as well as the context in which language skills are evaluated.

Population and Sampling
According to Walliman (2011), population refers to the total set of things (or cases) of a kind that are being studied. For Walliman, population does not necessarily mean people. It can also include objects. In this study, the population included examination questions. The sample size for this study was five English examinations from 2017 to 2021. The study further used a table of specification, and English language syllabus for Secondary School form i-iv (2010). The 2017-2021 school years were recent enough to provide sufficient data on how language skills are represented at macro-level English assessments. Yin (2018) indicates that for case studies, the number of cases could range from 1 to 10, depending on the depth of analysis required. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select cases for the proposed study in order to improve transferability in terms of the qualitative methodological approach (Collins & Onwueghose, 2007).

Data Collection Methods
This study conducted a document review to collect qualitative data. Specifically, the researchers analyzed national English examinations to assess how language skills are represented in English assessments at the macro level (content validity of the assessment instruments). The goal was to evaluate how language skills are expressed in summative English assessments. Additionally, the researchers compared common types of questions used to assess language skills in English examinations from 2017 to 2021, identified trends in the content areas of English examination questions and examined the correlation between the content in the sample examinations and curriculum content.

Data Collection Procedures
The study gathered data through document review, a user-friendly method that helps identify, record, and analyze various themes and sub-themes, as well as tables and charts. The qualitative data collected were compiled in a specific format for content analysis.

Data Analysis
The data analysis process began with a comprehensive review of relevant empirical studies,

conducted after developing the appropriate thematic framework. The focus of the investigation was on five national English language examinations administered between 2017 and 2021, chosen for their representative patterns in assessing language skills at the national level in recent years. The major themes derived from these examinations were used to summarize the findings from the qualitative data analysis, presented through narrative descriptions. In line with Neuman's (2007, p. 329) recommendation, qualitative explanations were supported by data-driven evidence, with direct quotes from informants used to reinforce these explanations. Additionally, similarities and differences across the selected documents were identified. This comparative analysis helped provide insights into both commonalities and discrepancies across the documents under review.

Content analysis was the primary method used to analyze the data. This versatile research method involves classifying communication content through word counts and making inferences based on that content. It is applicable to a wide range of topics and was essential in identifying the appropriate categories and units of analysis. As Cohen et al. (2007) explain, content analysis played a crucial role in ensuring that the categories and units of analysis accurately represented the nature of the documents, thereby providing a clear and systematic examination of the data.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. This section presents findings. The study sought to establish the mode of representation of language skills in the national English language examination. In attaining this objective, three main research questions were developed: The mode of representation of language skills, and the content areas in the English language examination papers from 2017 up to 2021. The themes were determined to reflect key issues that emerged from the data collected during the document review.

Research Question 1: How are English language skills presented in the national examinations?

This research question sought to establish how language skills are presented in the national examinations. The topics were set to reflect the key questions that emerged from the data collected during the document screening. To achieve this goal, the researchers collected data through

document review and analysed it using content analysis. The review of the national English examination documents focused on the current practices of language skills presentation in relation to the types of questions, specifically the way skills are presented (components/elements that assess receptive and productive skills).

After analyzing the content, particularly the constructs used to assess how language skills are represented in the national English language assessment, it was revealed that the mode of representation was predominantly focused on productive skills, especially writing. Writing skills accounted for about 42.3% of the total language skills assessed. However, speaking, another productive skill was not included in the assessment and was marked as 0%. This indicates that receptive skills, especially listening, were significantly underrepresented, despite being covered by 11.0% in the curriculum and listed in the Table of Specifications. For example, in the 2019 Table of Specifications for English, the topic "listening to and understanding simple texts about various events and situations" had a "number of elements" value of 2.8 and a "percentage weight per topic" of 13.1. However, in the assessment content, its representation through constructs was 0%. The review further shows that the representation of language skills in English language testing at the macro level indicated that receptive skills (reading) were assessed through question types, such as True-False, matching items, and multiple-choice items. These are not task-based items since they do not require much writing. In contrast, reading is involved throughout the question types. The findings also indicate that productive skills, particularly writing, are consistently assessed across the examinations, as answering all questions in the assessment requires writing. However, creative writing was mainly assessed through question types such as gap filling, short answers, and other task-based items related to language use, grammar, and vocabulary.

Similarly, Jinghua and Constanzo (2013) found that on the acquisition of the English language, Listening is crucial and is integrated with the other components of speaking and reading. Additionally, Sawaki et al. (2008) investigated whether language ability is unitary or divisible into independent components. The study revealed that "the current consensus in the field of language testing is that second language ability is multi-componential, with

a general factor as well as smaller group factors" (p. 3). Furthermore, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are distinct aspects of English language testing. The findings align with those by Hale et al. (1989).

Bozorgian (2012) examined the relationship among the four skills as measured by the IELTS and concluded that each of the four skills is unique. The recommendation that all the four skills be taken into account in second language learning and evaluation is, therefore, in the right direction. Also, Liao et al. (2010) examined the correlations of the scores among the TOEIC listening and reading tests and the TOEIC Speaking and Writing tests to determine whether or not the tests measure four separate language skills. It was found that each skill measures distinct aspects of English language proficiency that cannot be fully assessed by the other skills. For candidates to fully comprehend their language proficiency profiles, the researchers recommended that candidates should take all of the TOEIC tests (speaking, writing, reading and listening) in order to have their comprehensive language profiles. This finding is corroborated by Power et al. (2008), who indicate that each skill contributes uniquely to English language proficiency assessment.

Table 1 shows the description and the frequency of the common mode of representation of language skills in the English language examination papers between 2017 and 2021.

Table 1: The Modes of Representation of the Language Skills

Types of Examination Items (Question Types)	Description of Receptive Response Items and Productive Item Formats	Frequency
Receptive skills response items (Reading)		
True-false	A question(s) requiring a candidate to decide whether the statements are true or false	0
Matching items	Two columns, requiring a candidate to match them to get complete meaning	5 (4.5%)
Multiple choice	A question(s) with alternative answers which provide possible solutions to the problem	38 (34%)
Productive skills response items (Writing)		
Gap filling	A question(s) with gaps/spaces to be filed in and the candidate's job is to fill in the missing word or phrase	5 (4.5%)
Short Answers	A question(s) requiring a candidate to give brief answers (in a phrase or sentence)	17 (15%)
Task types of items	An open-ended question type that requires students to complete a written assignment (essay) to assess their writing and language use	47 (42%)

Table 1 presents data on the trends in language ability expressions, specifically regarding productive and receptive response items/constructions, analyzed using the English examination questions from 2017 to 2021. As shown in the table, productive skills account for the largest proportion (61,5%) of the examination items (question types) while receptive skills make up 38.5%. This indicates that the examinations focused more on assessing productive skills (writing) than receptive skills. Furthermore, both receptive skills (listening) and productive skills (speaking) are neglected in the assessment, with a value of 0 assigned to each. This observation limits the ability to evaluate students' proficiency in language skills that are not assessed.

This shows that the current assessment does not provide sufficient insight into students' oral proficiency levels, which in turn limits opportunities for curricular improvements, teaching, learning, and evaluation at a micro level. The current assessment does not provide sufficient insight into students' oral proficiency levels, which in turn limits opportunities for curricular improvements, teaching, learning, and evaluation at a micro level.

Research Question 2: What are common modes of representation of language skills in the national assessment of English language?

The study further sought to identify common modes of representation of language skills in the national

assessment of English, with the goal of gaining an honest understanding of the adequacy of the summative assessment.

Figure 1 compares the common modes (question types) of representation of language skills in the CSEE 002 - English language examination from 2017 to 2021.
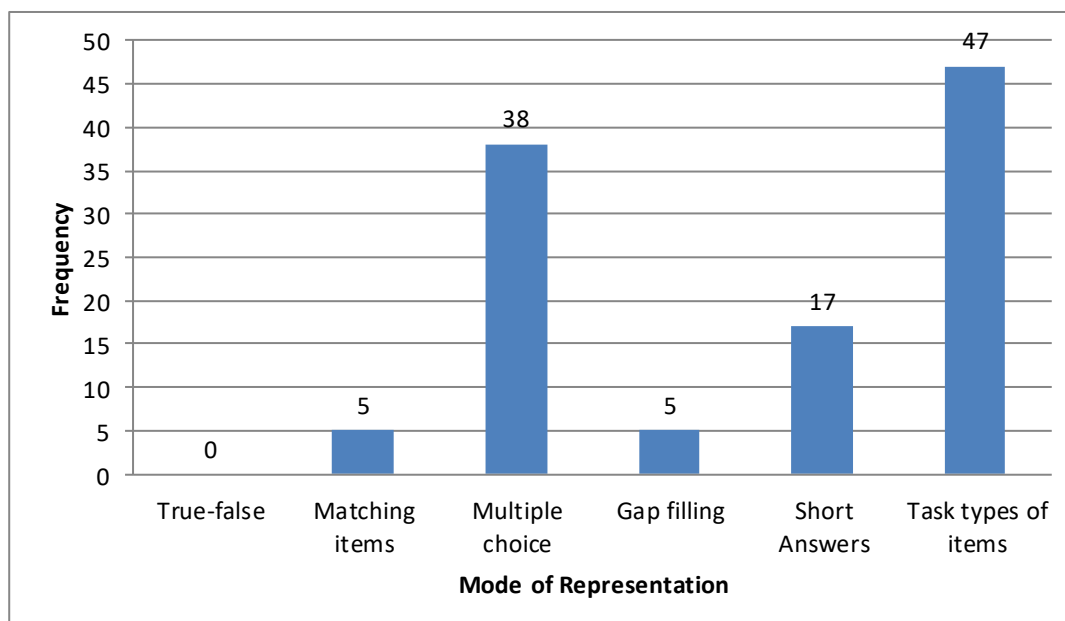

Figure 1: Representation of language skills Across Question Types in the English language Examinations

In Figure 1, the assessment focused on the literacy aspect of productive skills, specifically writing tasks. The task types included 47 items (42%) related to writing, 17 items (15.2%) involving short answers, and 5 items (4.5%) involving gap filling. In contrast, the receptive skills items were limited to multiple-choice questions (38 items, 33.9%), matching items (5 items, 4.5%) and no true-false items (0%).

The multiple-choice question type ranked second, covering 33.9% of the items, compared to the other types. This indicates that greater emphasis is placed on writing skills within the productive skills category, while speaking skills are underrepresented. In terms of receptive skills, the focus is mainly on reading. The results suggest that the course objectives outlined in the syllabus are not fully reflected in the assessment. It highlights that a more comprehensive approach to assessing speaking abilities should include interactions with others in English. Incorporating measures for listening and speaking skills would be beneficial. These observations align with Powers (2013), who advocates for a comprehensive assessment of English-language skills, including reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

Research Question 3: What are the trends in content areas within summative assessments of the English language?

This research question sought to establish trends in content areas within the summative assessments of the English language. It sought to establish how language skills were distributed over five consecutive years and to explore the representation of these skills in the assessments. (Table 2, p. 44). The table illustrates the coverage of language skills in English examinations, providing an overview of the frequency of items and constructs while highlighting trends in the representation of language skills from 2017 to 2021.

The analysis of the English language summative assessments from 2017 to 2021 reveals key trends in the distribution of content areas. Reading was initially the most emphasized skill, making up nearly half of the exam content in 2017 and 2018, but its representation significantly declined to just 12% by 2021. Conversely, grammar (language focus) grew in prominence, peaking at 54.2% in 2020, suggesting a shift toward structural language knowledge. Writing, which had dipped in the middle years, showed a notable increase in 2021, reflecting renewed attention to productive language skills.

Table 2: Trends of Content Areas in CSEE 022 English Language Examination Papers

Content area	Examination items/constructs									
	2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Reading	10	47.6	10	47.6	7	29.2	7	29.2	3	12
Listening	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Speaking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Writing	5	23.8	5	23.8	3	12.5	3	12.5	9	36
Language focus (Grammar)	3	14.3	3	14.3	12	50	13	54.2	9	36
Vocabulary	3	14.3	3	14.3	2	8.3	1	4.1	4	16

Despite these shifts, listening and speaking skills were entirely absent from all five years of assessments. This exclusion raises concerns about the comprehensiveness and communicative validity of the examinations, as these skills are essential for the real-world language use. Their absence likely reflects logistical challenges but also signals a potential neglect of balanced language instruction and assessment.

Vocabulary was inconsistently assessed, ranging from 4.1% to 16%, indicating it was not a stable focus in the exams. This irregular representation may stem from vocabulary being embedded in other sections rather than tested independently. Overall, the results suggest a summative assessment system are still heavily rooted in written and structural aspects of language, with insufficient attention to communicative competence and skill integration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that the representation of language skills in the national examinations from 2017 to 2021 is heavily skewed towards productive skills, particularly writing while listening and speaking are entirely excluded. This narrow focus fails to capture essential components of communicative competence. To promote a more comprehensive and balanced assessment, the examination framework should be revised to include all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in line with communicative language teaching principles.

It is also concluded that the analysis indicates a strong emphasis on writing and a reliance on multiple-choice questions for reading, with no effort to assess oral skills. This limits the range of language use scenarios presented in the examinations and overlooks students' ability to use the language in spoken contexts. Over the five-year period, reading tasks showed a fluctuating but overall decline trend while grammar became increasingly prominent. Although writing tasks saw some improvement in recent years, listening and speaking skills remained consistently unassessed. These findings highlight the need for a more inclusive and skill-balanced approach to English language assessment in the national examinations.

The examination framework should be revised to include all four language skills reading, writing, listening, and speaking—to ensure a balanced evaluation and alignment with communicative language teaching principles. Varied and task-based question formats should be incorporated, including audio-based and oral interaction tasks, to enhance authenticity and more accurately assess students' overall language proficiency. Clear benchmarks should be established to ensure the consistent inclusion of all language skill areas each year. Additionally, standardized weighting should be introduced for each skill, with particular emphasis on underrepresented areas, such as listening and speaking, to promote balanced and sustained coverage across assessments

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