

# An Investigation of the Apparent Speeded Nature of Primary School Leaving Composition and Letter Writing Examination

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**Abstract**—All achievement tests have some element of speed requiring candidates to write their answers within a stipulated time frame. However, too much emphasis on speed may not give the examinee adequate time to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do with respect to the subject matter studied. As a result, the evaluation of candidate's work may not be a true reflection of his or her content mastery level. Also the results generated may not show content concepts and principles that are not understood. A correct profile of information that is not understood, from diagnostic point of view, is critical in educational systems where assessment is designed to provide feedback to the teacher, the learner and other stakeholders in a formative sense. The Botswana primary school leaving English Language examination appears to be steeped on speed as candidates are required to write composition and letter pieces within an hour. An exploratory study was conducted on views of teachers about time allocation in writing primary school leaving examination English language composition and letter writing. Two hundred and twelve (212) teachers participated from 40 schools across Botswana. Results indicate that majority (67%) of teachers view the time as inadequate and therefore raising validity questions on this examination. There is therefore a need to investigate this matter further as this might have unintended results of the examination.

**Index Terms**—assessment, speed, writing performance, examination duration, diagnostic assessment, metacognition

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Revised National Policy on Education [RNPE] of 1994, education delivery system in Botswana follows a 7+3+2+4 model. Primary education forms the foundation of the model. Learners at this level study for seven years at the end of which they sit for Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). Originally, the examination had a dual purpose; that of determining the extent to which learners have acquired the content taught and at the same time providing a rank order of scores so that only the high scoring group may be selected into the next level of education (Report on the National Commission on Education, 1993). However, due to unequal distribution of resources between primary and junior secondary education, PSLE functioned more to serve the second purpose. For example, in 1988 only 45.2% of primary school leaving candidates could progress to junior secondary schools (Education Statistics Report, 1999). Educational researchers have studied this problem and made interesting conclusions, such as the following:

Achievement tests have the dual purpose of measuring what students have learnt to ascertain whether certain minimal levels of performance are obtained, and selecting some students for further studies. These objectives are not necessarily compatible. But often if there are few opportunities for further education to be allocated, selection guides the construction of examination papers and test items.' (Eisemon, 1997, p.127)

This situation where the number of primary school leaving candidates exceeded available places at junior secondary persisted till the late 1980s. The introduction of universal basic education in the early 90s dramatically increased progression rate from primary to junior secondary education. For example, Botswana's coefficient of efficiency in 1997 was 84% indicating a high progression rate from primary to junior secondary (Lewin, 1997). In 1997, out of a total of 40 297 standard sevens (final year of primary school) pupils, 38 420 progressed to junior secondary school; a transition rate of 95.3% (Educational Statistics Report, 1999). Such high progression rates meant PSLE could no longer serve as a selection instrument. Therefore, deliberate policy reforms were made to introduce an assessment system that was more diagnostic as indicated below.

The Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), taken at the end of primary level, will no longer be used to determine progression to junior secondary school level. Starting with 1997 Standard 7 results, assessment will change to Criterion Referenced Testing (CRT), a procedure used to determine the pupil's educational attainment. (National Development Plan 8, 1997 page 337)

Thus, examination process became an integral part of the learning and teaching process; it became a means of determining the extent to which learning is actually taking place in schools. A document on CRT implementation captures the examination reform spirit by stating that;

Testing then becomes a systematic process of gathering evidence of what the child can do relative to the instructional outcome, gathered at opportune time that allow the teacher to use the feedback to make judgments about appropriate adjustments in the instructional environment. [Criterion Referenced Testing: Rationale for Implementation, 1992 page 7]

Assessment of composition and letter writing has also been transformed to conform to the policy reforms outlined above. Firstly, the current language syllabus has well defined content that is divided into specific instructional objectives with these meant to guide the teaching and learning process. Secondly, an analytic marking scheme is used to mark composition and letter examination papers. Analytic marking is more reliable and has the potential to generate diagnostic information relating to language skills exhibited by candidates. However, transformation of the assessment model from normative based stream to a more diagnostic criterion referenced one has not taken into consideration the critical role examination duration has on the performance of examinees. The current 60 minutes duration for composition and letter writing served its purpose well during the normative era when the central issue was to select a few top ranking candidates for secondary education. The main thrust of current assessment trends is to generate information relating to the learner's strengths and weaknesses and such information forms a critical component of the learning and teaching process.

Composition and letter writing assesses two skills almost simultaneously; these are reading and writing. Numerous researchers have proposed theories that provide an explanatory perspective of reading and writing and generally these theories can be classified into three broad groups; namely Traditional View of Reading, Cognitive Theory and the Metacognitive theories of reading. The Traditional Theory mainly focus on the printed text as the main center of gravity with the text containing all the meaning to be extracted and reading '*in this view is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents in the quest for making sense of the text (Vaezi, 2006)*'; the text may be a question, passage, poem or an extract from a book. The main focus of testing is to determine the extent to which the examinee is able to provide information that is required by the stimulus. The reader then becomes a passive recipients of information contained in the text. On the other hand, the cognitive theory presents a proposal that is directly opposed to the traditional model. Under the Cognitive theory, reading is regarded as a cognitive process where the reader constructs his or her meaning from the text. Comprehension of the text is influenced not just by the words in the text but it is at the same time controlled by the readers' psychological traits and social experiences. The cognitive perspective therefore, proposes an interactive nature of reading where the reader has to comprehend the stimulus material but most importantly the reader integrates his or her background knowledge into the context. Since different learners have different psychological and social background knowledge, each learner will interpret the same stimulus differently. Two other relevant theories closely related to the Cognitivist approach are the Socio-cultural theory and the Reader Response Theory. According to Vygotsky (1978) the reader's cultural and social background plays a major role in the extraction of meaning from a given text. On the other hand, the Reader Response Theory as propounded by Rosenblatt (1978) postulates that good readers make connections to their reading by keying in associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas providing the deepest interaction between reader and text. In this case the theory does not only look at the reader's cognitive faculties but also factors in the affective domain in the reading process.

Research has extended the central role played by readers by showing that as readers read a given text they are at the same time aware of their own thinking processes. The ability of a reader to reflect on what he or she is reading and at the same time make adjustments and change strategies has been referred to as metacognition. According to the Metacognitive theory, knowledge structure consists of three distinct and highly interactive variables; namely personal or self variables, task variables and strategy variables (see Flavel, 1979). Under the self component successful students at all levels seem to have a greater awareness of themselves as writers and understand that the purpose of writing is to communicate a message to the other person. The task component looks at the extent to which the student understands the writing task and its requirements. Strategies component involves incubation of ideas and subsequent development of a draft or road map (Flavel, 1979). In a nutshell, the reader or writer must be fully aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses as reader or writer; he or she should be able to understand the purpose of the task at hand and possess appropriate strategies for solving the task as required by the stimulus material.

Recent research studies have established a significant link between metacognitive knowledge and writing performance. In a research study conducted by Kasper (1997), a sample of 120 students was divided into two groups; ESL 09 Group comprising 67 students and ESL 91 made up of 56 students (Kasper, 1997). In both groups, students writing skills were assessed using a variety of activities that included summaries, open-ended comprehension questions, and analytical essays in a variety of rhetorical modes. The extract below provides some of the requirements of the experiment.

'To pass each course, students had to receive a passing grade on an end-of-semester writing assessment. For both courses, this assessment consisted of an in-class final writing examination in which students were given two hours to plan, and revise a persuasive essay on their choice of three assigned topics derived from a reading text.' (Kasper, 1997, p. 5).

The researcher concluded that successful student writers were aware that the goal of writing is to communicate a message, and they tended to choose effective strategies to accomplish that goal. These strategies include planning, monitoring, and evaluating during the task of composing.

All these theories help to demonstrate the complex nature of the writing process. Writing is not just a matter of providing correct information but a product of high level interaction between the printed test, the writer's psych-social characteristics and intended audience to mention but a few of the variables.

The main aim of this research study was to assess the suitability of the current 60 minutes duration for composition and letter writing. The main research question was to explore teachers' opinions on the suitability of the examination duration in the English Language composition and letter writing in Botswana primary school leaving examinations.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### Study design

The study followed an exploratory design to get views of teachers about time allocated to writing of English Language composition and letter in primary school in the 10 educational regions in Botswana. Exploratory designs are useful in uncovering extend of a problem. The exploration was done through administration of a questionnaire to a sample of teachers in the regions.

### Participants

The study respondents were upper primary teachers who had been in the field for a considerable length of time and had observed candidates write the composition and letter examination at some point in time. A total of 40 primary schools were selected from 40 inspectoral areas as shown in Table 1. Inspectoral areas are administrative divides within a region for ease of coordination. The number of schools selected within a region was the same as the number of inspectoral areas within that region ensuring that there was a school selected to represent each inspectoral area. Each school was randomly selected. In each school, upper primary teachers were selected for participation resulting in an average of 5 teachers per school. Botswana primary school classes are divided into lower (standards 1-2), middle (standards 3-4) and upper(standards 5-7). Participating teachers were therefore those teaching the upper stream. A total of 212 teachers participated with majority being female (67%) as females make majority of teachers at this level.

### Instruments

Teachers' opinions on the suitability of the examination duration were measured using a questionnaire made up of five likert-scale type items and one open-ended question. The first four items requiring the respondents to indicate, on a scale of 1 to 5, whether the current sixty minutes duration of the examination was enough, more than enough or not enough. The last item gave respondents an opportunity to give reasons to support their preferred examination duration.

TABLE 1  
EDUCATIONAL REGIONS AND INSPECTORAL AREAS

	Region	No of Inspectoral Areas	No of Schools Sampled
1	Central	14	14
2	Kgatleng	02	02
3	Kweneng	04	04
4	North East	03	03
5	South East	04	04
6	South	06	06
7	Kgalagadi	02	02
8	North West	03	03
9	Chobe	01	01
10	Gantsi	01	01
	Total	40	40

## III. RESULTS

Before responding to the main research question on the extent to which emphasis on speed of response affect a candidate's performance in the English Language composition and letter writing, teachers were asked to reflect on which was more difficult; composition or letter writing. Most of the teachers (78.3%) who responded agreed composition writing and letter writing were of similar demand.

Responses from teachers on time allocated for English Language composition and letter writing were in three parts; time being enough, more than enough or not being enough. When teachers were asked to the statement "The time allowed for PSLE composition and letter writing in the examination is enough", two thirds of teachers (66%) disagreed (disagreed and strongly disagreed combined). This indicates that majority find the time allocated to this examination not enough. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.

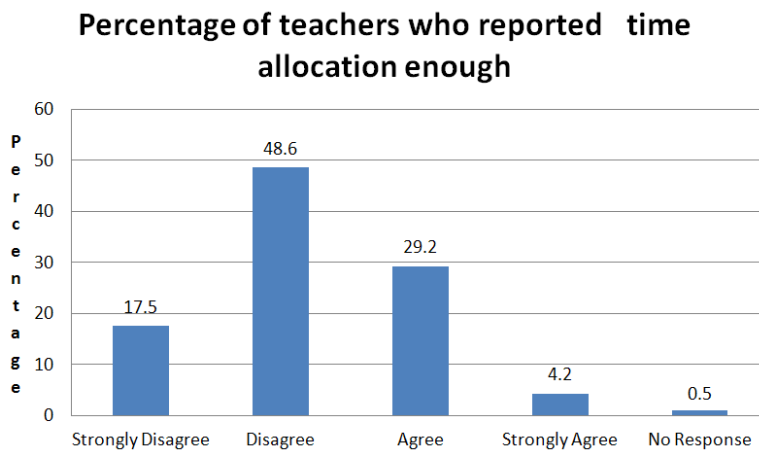


Figure 1 Percentage of teachers who reported time allocation enough

When asked to respond to the statement “The time allowed for PSLE composition and letter writing in the examination is more enough”, only three percent (3%) agreed (agree and strongly agree combined) as shown in Fig. 2. This indicates that majority find the time allocated to this examination not more than enough.

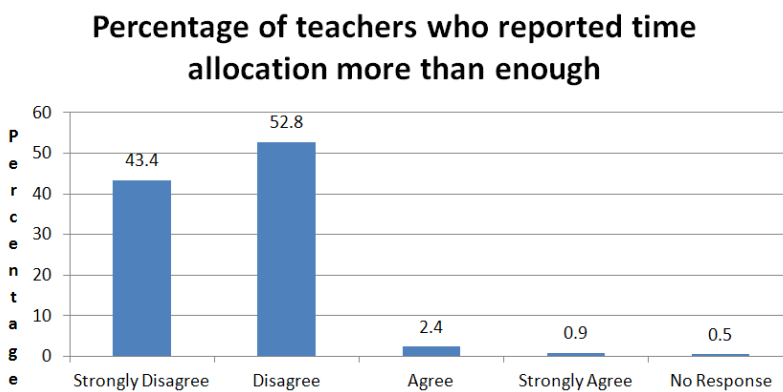


Figure 2 Percentage of teachers who reported time allocation more than enough

When asked to respond to the statement “The time allowed for PSLE composition and letter writing in the examination is not enough”, about two thirds (67.5%) agreed (agree and strongly agree combined) as shown in Fig. 3. This indicates that majority find the time allocated to this examination not enough.

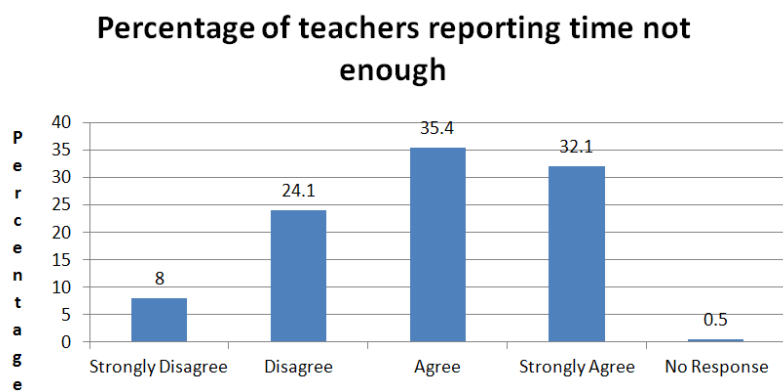


Figure 3 Percentage of teachers reporting time not enough

Teachers were further presented with possible time allocation options and only 23.1 % opted for the current allocation of one hour or less. More than half (58%) opted for one and a half hours while 18% chose two hours as ideal time allocation for the composition and letter writing. These results clearly show increased time favorable. Teachers were asked to give reasons for their choice of time and reasons cited for preferred option was that candidates needed time to make drafts and make logical presentations of their work. The time allocated should therefore be enough to allow candidates to carefully read and fully comprehend the stimulus material before writing. Having digested and analyzed the topic, examinees can then generate as many ideas as possible and then use the ideas to produce a draft. Respondents put more emphasis on logical development of ideas, critical thinking and creativity. Responding teachers

expressed the need for examinees to be able to present their ideas in a logical sequence in order to produce a coherent and interesting piece of writing. The composition or letter presented should not only be interesting to the reader but should also serve as evidence of critical analysis of situations discussed. It is the opinion of majority of respondents that the current 60 minutes duration does not give candidates enough time to show what they know, understand and can do in the writing process.

Teachers further assert that that correct spelling, grammar and punctuation are some of the language use criterions that are poorly assessed due to limited time. Teachers indicated that most examinees, especially the slow ones, have no time to correct spelling mistakes, tense and punctuation hence producing poor quality work. Also of equal importance was proof reading as an integral part of the writing process. Examinees have to re-read what they have written in order to correct mistakes or add any valuable information that might have been left out.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The results show that teachers do have varied views on the time allocation for writing composition and letter in primary school. Basically there are two groups of teachers; those who support the current time and those who suggest that the time be increased. Teachers who are in support of the status quo are of the view that the current time gives candidates 30 minutes writing composition and the other 30 minutes writing the letter. As one teacher commented;

*'Pupils tend to write quickly and then disturb or make noise after finishing. Therefore, 1 hour will enable the child to give 30 minutes to the letter and 30 minutes to composition. If you give more time pupils will end up canceling and changing the correct answers therefore reducing the marks'.*

Another argument made in support of the 60 minutes duration was that candidates are given guidelines on how to use the time. For example, a topic may be divided into three sub-topics indicating to the candidate that he or she must produce at least three paragraphs discussing each of the stipulated sub-topics. Teachers spend a lot of time in class training pupils on how to correctly follow these guidelines. Mid-year and End of Year examinations are used to prepare learners for the actual examination. One teacher attested to that saying; *'A well trained candidate who is capable and who knows what the question is calling for takes less than 30 minutes to finish writing a composition.'*

The perspectives presented by these teachers resonate well with the traditional theory of writing discussed earlier. According to this theory, the printed text (items and guidelines) has all the information that must be interpreted by the candidate. The learner's psycho-social characteristics as well as the interaction between the learner's attributes and the printed text play a very insignificant role. Teachers who subscribe to the traditional theory expect candidates to be able to read the item and immediately start writing.

On the other hand, practitioners in the field who feel that the time is not enough have presented a number of relevant reasons why the current time should be increased. Firstly, the teachers have raised a concern that examinees need time to read the stimulus material, brainstorm and use the ideas generated to develop a conceptual map or draft. The draft gives the writer the opportunity to add new ideas, arrange the ideas in a logical and coherent manner before making the final product. Secondly, teachers feel that the current time only benefits learners who are able to read and write quickly. One teacher commented that; *'Standard 7s are just like any other pupils and have different abilities therefore slow learners need more time to write and go over their work correcting mistakes.'*

The third key point raised by respondents who support increased time is that writing should not only be concerned with providing correct answers but should develop creativity and critical thinking faculties on the side of the learner. An assessment of writing therefore, should not only focus on determining whether the candidate can provide correct responses within a limited time but rather an emphasis should be on the ability of the learner to exhibit critical thinking qualities and write a story that is interesting to the reader. The time allocated should *'... allow pupils to be creative and to do rational thinking before writing their composition and letter. Thus composition needs more creativity to make the reader/ maker to be interested to read ahead.'*

The fourth point relates to the interaction between the individual candidate's socio-economic background and the context presented by the stimulus material. For example, an item that requires candidates to write about a day at the clinic may appear straight forward and simple. However, there are rural communities in Botswana that do not have access to clinics. In urban areas there might be several clinics in one locality thus giving the child a lot of material to choose from. Children from rural areas with no access to a clinic will find it hard to try and come up with an interesting and realistic composition. As one teacher said;

*'You will find that at times even the scene set (topic) is not familiar to some of the candidates depending on their locality (urban vs. rural), so it takes some candidates time to digest and come up with the introduction, resulting in failure to complete their work.'*

Lastly, there is a concern that assessment of writing does not take into consideration the needs of the writer from a metacognitive perspective. According to the metacognition theory as shown earlier, writers continuously evaluate their writing by doing self-reflections and being able to analyze their thinking processes. These reflections are strategies employed by the writer during the writing process to make sure that the writers personal needs or inner feelings are satisfied or fulfilled. As one teacher commented on increasing time allocation;

*More time will allow candidates some time to think and structure their letter and composition in a manner that will be satisfying their expectations and expertise rather than having to race against time before the learner has fully convinced themselves with what their expectations of an ideal letter or composition are.*

According to this teacher, the current time does not allow candidates to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do. The results obtained in the end reflect partial knowledge and may lack construct validity.

The one hour duration appears to be suitable for candidates who can read and quickly. Examinees that prefer to spend time analyzing the topic, developing road maps or drafts and editing the drafts almost always run out of time. This raises issue of validity, reliability and fairness of the examination process. Learners come from different socio-economic backgrounds and also belong to different sub-groups of the population. Efforts must be made to try and cater for the most salient sub-groups so as to make the examination as fair as possible. The interaction between the candidate and the item may take more time for remote area learners than may be the case for other candidates. Increasing the duration would undoubtedly benefit this group of learners.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study provides evidence that the current duration for composition and letter writing examination need to be evaluated. For the educational system to derive maximum benefit from diagnostic assessment, it is necessary to review all elements that may have a negative impact on the validity and reliability of examination results. Examination duration is one of those elements and therefore extensive research studies have to be conducted to assess the fairness of examinations duration.

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