

**Nile Valley University
College of Graduate Studies**

**The Sudan Secondary School
Certificate English Examinations (2004-2007):
An Analytical Study**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts (MA) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language**

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DEDICATION

To my parents,

for their love...

To my wife,

for her generosity...

To my teacher and friend

Ustaz Salaheddin Numan,

for his guidance and unique friendship...

To my teacher colleagues,

for sharing the hardships of the job...

I dedicate this research.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research, titled "The Sudan Secondary School Certificate English Examinations (2004-2007): An Analytical Study" is to study and analyze these exams and propose suggestions to promote areas of weaknesses.

The methodology used in the research is the analytical descriptive approach. The techniques used include the questionnaire, interview, complexity measures as well as diagrammatic and statistical means.

The questionnaire targeted the population of the teachers of the secondary level who assembled in 2007 in Khartoum for the rating of the SSSC English Exam. The interview was made with Mr. Musbah Babiker AL Faki the setter of SSSC English Exams.

The study comprises five chapters including the introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis and discussion and conclusion.

As for the results, it has been found that these exams attain a low degree of usefulness and do not reflect the students' real language abilities. The study has also revealed the deficiency in the syllabus (SPINE series) being taught in the secondary level and that it needs to be re-graded and reviewed. The study suggests a reform in the present form of SSSC English Exam considering the communicative approach to language testing and learning.

مستخلص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة (امتحان اللغة الانجليزية للشهادة الثانوية السودانية في الفترة من ٢٠٠٤ إلى ٢٠٠٧ : دراسة تحليلية) إلى تحليل امتحان اللغة الانجليزية للشهادة الثانوية السودانية خلال هذه الفترة وتقديم مقترحات لتطوير جوانب القصور.

المنهج المتبع في الدراسة هو المنهج التحليلي الوصفي باستخدام وسائل مثل الاستبانة والمقابلة ومقاييس درجة الصعوبة مع التوضيح بالطرق البيانية والإحصائية. وقد استهدفت الاستبانة معلمي اللغة الانجليزية بالمرحلة الثانوية الذين اشتركوا في تصحيح ورقة الامتحان في الخرطوم في العام ٢٠٠٧، كما أجرى الباحث مقابلة مع الأستاذ المصباح بابكر الفاضل واضع امتحان اللغة الانجليزية في ذلك العام والأعوام السابقة له. اشتملت الدراسة على خمسة فصول وهي مقدمة البحث، والإطار النظري للدراسة، ومنهج البحث، والتحليل والمناقشة، ثم الخاتمة.

وقد توصل الباحث إلى خلاصات مهمة، أبرزها أن امتحان اللغة الانجليزية للشهادة الثانوية السودانية لا يحقق جدواه كما انه لا يعكس القدرات اللغوية الحقيقية للطلبة، كما أشارت الدراسة إلى وجود قصور في منهج اللغة الانجليزية SPINE وضرورة مراجعته، وتقترح الدراسة تعديل الشكل الحالي للامتحان والاستفادة من المنهج التواصلي لتعلم اللغة وضرورة إبراز ذلك في التقويم والقياس اللغوي.

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***Notice:**

To avoid redundancy and confusion all the tables of the statistical analysis of the questionnaire have been transferred to the appendixes. The tables of the calculation of lexical density, lexical variety and lexical sophistication have also been transferred to the appendixes as the figures in chapter (4) will do the same.

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

INRODUCTION

1.0. Introduction

The study of the usefulness of achievement tests is a practice that has proliferated in language testing. This study will try to use some techniques to investigate the aspects of the usefulness of the Sudan Secondary School Certificate (SSSC) English Exams.

1.1. Background

Language testing, which is viewed by many as a mysterious and technical field, has become the job of specialised institutions. In fact, the field has developed different tools of measurement and scrutiny as the decisions based on the interpretations of the scores of language tests have serious impacts on test-takers, educational system and society as a whole. Language tests help us to know about the test-takers' language ability in the light of previously stated objectives.

Standardized achievement tests, for example, are designed to measure the students' language abilities at large scale with reference to a specific text-book or curriculum. So, the language ability tested here is usually bound to an already designed body of materials which the students are expected to study during a particular period of time after which they are put to the test.

The Sudan Secondary School Certificate (SSSC) English Exam as an achievement test is then expected to:

- measure the students' actual language ability (ies) according to the objectives stated in the SPINE books – the textbooks which they study in the secondary school.
- reinforce language learning.
- discriminate between the students and that suggests every score should have a meaning.
- be based on what the students have studied and been prepared for.
- be useful and at the expected level of difficulty.

The above can be supported by Alan Davies (1977 : P 45),

"Achievement or attainment tests are concerned with assessing what has been learned of a known syllabus ... The use being made of the measure is to find out just how much has been learned of what has been taught."

1.2. Statement of the Problem

During the last eight years or so, many students of the (SSSC) have started to show great neglect to the English language as a subject for which they sit the exam by the end of the third class of secondary level and then shift to university. At the same time it has been noticed that the content of the (SSSC) English Examination paper has become more related to the content of SPINE (5) rather than SPINE (6) – the book which they study during the third year. A third factor is that the questions of the exams have become repeatedly used, simple and liable to be predicted – the thing that made them below the expected level of difficulty. In addition to all the above, the square root system used in upgrading the students'

scores resulted in the situation that the students can get very high marks which do not really reflect their language ability (ies) which resulted in the students' neglect to the subject as they can get these high marks or at least pass without the need for hard work. Due to that the teaching-learning process has been affected negatively and the exams have lost their discriminating feature and expected usefulness.

The researcher does strongly believe that the system of language testing can foster or undermine the effectiveness of language learning. In the absence of truthful tools of measurement, it is impossible to make accurate interpretations about the students' achievements and that may contribute to the weakening of the learning process.

1.3. Research Objectives

The research aims to analyze the aspects of the usefulness of the (SSSC) English Exams from 2004 to 2007. The study will investigate the relevance of these exams to the content of the SPINE books and the consistency of the level of the exam with the materials of the SPINE considering the students' actual language ability. The research aims to promote the present form of the (SSSC) English Exam.

1.4. Significance of the Research

The research is important because it tries to set principles to ensure the fairness of the (SSSC) English Exam as a high-stake test. Moreover, it gives insights and useful findings about the effectiveness of the syllabus being taught in the secondary school in the Sudan. The study can also help to find solutions to the problem of the deteriorating standard of English by encouraging the use of

enlightened tests as a means to motivate for hard work and effective learning. Good tests can have beneficial effects on the teaching-learning process.

This research can then help (SSSC) English Exams designers, syllabus designers as well as teachers. The syllabus, the learner and the methodology – all of these – can, in fact, be measured accurately, if we use useful tests.

1.5. Research Hypotheses

This research is conducted to prove or disprove these hypotheses.

- 1- The questions of the (SSSC) English Exams are repeated, predictable and insensitive to the students' language ability.
- 2- The questions of the (SSSC) English Exams are relevant to the SPINE books, but do not cater for the students' future needs.
- 3- The upgrading process that occurs to the students' scores discourages both students and teachers to do at their best.
- 4- The questions of the (SSSC) English Exams are more related to SPINE (5) than they are to SPINE (6).
- 5- The (SSSC) English Exam attains a very low degree of usefulness.

1.6. Research Delimits

The study is limited to the (SSSC) English Exams during the period (2004 - 2007).

1.7. Definition of Terms And Abbreviations

- a. (SSSC) English Exams: It is used to refer to Sudan Secondary School Certificate English Exam which the students sit for by the end of the secondary level.
- b. SPINE books: This is the English series which students study in general education. (4), (5), and (6) are studied during the secondary level.

1.8. Test, Exam or Examination

According to authoritative dictionaries the term 'examination' is considered formal, meanwhile 'exam' colloquial or informal. Also some dictionaries consider the term 'test' as less formal than examination; however in the field of language testing, we notice that the term 'test' is preferred to 'examination', so we come across achievement tests, placement tests, proficiency tests...etc. Though it is less formal, the term test has turned to be a jargon, maybe because it is simple and more practical than the long term examination. For pragmatic and practical reasons, the researcher would prefer to use the term 'exam', though colloquial, instead of the long one examination. This simplification is suggested here because the term 'exam' has been used so many times throughout the study. So, SSSC English Exams will be used instead of SSSC English Examinations. This is to save time and space.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Any academic study which aims at reaching sound judgments should set out from a solid theoretical framework on which new findings should be based. In this part of the research the researcher will try to trace the basic concepts, topics, terminology, and findings in the field of language testing.

2.2. Testing and Tests

Longman Dictionary of Applied linguistics (1987), defines the term test as "any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge and performance", meanwhile testing is the use of tests, or the study of the theory and practice of their use, development, evaluation, ...etc.

For most pupils and most students, assessments, tests and examinations are very much a part of the educational process. If these assessments are made in an atmosphere of intense competition, then the very words "assessments, tests or examinations" can produce very definite feelings of discomfort in those about to be assessed. This is because to most people, assessment is associated with selection – into the next class, into a particular stream or into higher education. However, selection should not be the only function of educational assessment and that means the pedagogic functions of assessment should come first, i. e., stressing the effectiveness and the enhancement of teaching-learning situations (Gerda Siann et al: 1985: 234).

As for language tests, they play a powerful role in the lives of many individuals, acting as gateways at important transitional moments in education, in employment and in moving from one country to another. Since language tests are devices for institutional control of people, it is clearly important that they should be understood, and subjected to scrutiny (Tim McNamara: 2000: 4). Therefore, test validation has become an important tool of investigation which can help develop language tests and language testing in general.

2.3. A Distinction of the Terms: Measurement, Testing and Evaluation

According to Purves, edited by James R. Squire, (1977: 245), one must clearly draw a distinction between the terms measurement, testing and evaluation. Although the terms are used interchangeably, to distinguish each one from the other is very much useful. Measurement properly refers to any attempt to ascribe human behaviour (usually in mathematical rather than verbal terms), and includes the ways by which the behaviour is elicited and the terms in which it is reported. In education testing usually refers to a formal means of getting people to perform so that their behaviour can be measured. The results of testing may be reported in mathematical or verbal terms. Evaluation is the assignment of worth to human behaviour, and most especially in latter-day educational circles to a group's effort to educate people, which is to say a programme. Individuals may be evaluated too, but the term most frequently used to describe that form of evaluation is grading.

So, the researcher would prefer to use the terms wherever they occur in this study the way they have been distinguished above.

2.4. Testing: A Historical Overview

Testing has developed alongside the developments that have taken place in logic, psychology and sociology. Throughout the centuries testing was and is still being affected by the general prevailing educational philosophy and language view.

Since a long time ago teachers have been accustomed to evaluating their students' progress. To achieve that purpose they usually use tests and examinations. However, these tests have taken different forms. They might be oral, written or practical (M. Connaughton in E. Stones: 1971: 427). In the medieval era, for instance, tests took the form of disputation. The students were given a topic and it was usually couched as a proposition which they were expected to attack. They had to reveal as much logic as they could in order to qualify for degrees. The student's education would be directed to fitting him to conduct his argument according to the rules of scholastic logic. Although the medieval disputation began as oral and in Latin, its form improved to vernacular education and to the written form. The criterion, however, of effective discourse remained the judgment of the teacher or some external group of examiners (Purves in James R. Squire: 1977: 230 – 31).

Written examinations came with the production of paper. In England, written examinations at Oxford and Cambridge did not emerge until the beginning of the nineteenth century and they became widespread at the postsecondary level both there and in the United States by the middle of the century (Ibid).

Besides judging discourse, English teachers have traditionally measured their pupil's knowledge of the materials in their courses. Spelling tests, quizzes on literary history and on characters and lines from texts, tests of correct usage, or of

grammatical or rhetorical principles have abounded for generations. Much of this kind of testing was on one form or another of rote learning, and, being so differed from essay examinations in that the answer was prejudged and known by both the teacher and pupil presumably. If the pupil forgot them, the master judged the pupil to have failed the course (Ibid).

As might be expected, when the necessity arose for testing to be conducted on a scale larger than that of the classroom, the type of testing changed a little. The university entrance examinations contained both questions dealing with pieces of information presumably learned before and questions that called for the marshalling of evidence (DuBois: 1970: 3 – 4). In many cases, the tests dealt with texts that the students were assigned to read during the course of the year before the examination, so that university entrance examination helped determine the syllabus of the secondary school English class.

The American Civil Service began competitive tests in the 1880s. Most of the early tests were practical, not theoretical as had been the Chinese Civil Service examinations, instituted 3000 years earlier. Occasionally on the American tests there were questions of general information, although many complained that this type of question was unfair because it was not specific to the qualifications of the job. The important contribution of these examinations was that they were standardized, particularly in their administration and scoring, so that charges of bias could not readily be brought. Parallel to the development of job aptitude testing in the Civil Service came the growth of psychological testing in the latter part of the nineteenth century, dominated by Galton and Pearson in England, Cattell and Thorndike in the

United States, and Binet in France. These pioneers developed varieties of means of measuring the intelligence and other psychological attributes of both individuals and groups (DuBois: 3 – 16).

The great breakthrough in large-group testing occurred during World War I with the development of the Army Alpha Test, which included some measures of verbal aptitude (ability to follow oral directions, ability to discern synonyms and antonyms, ability to unscramble sentences, and ability to perceive analogies) (Du-Bois: 65). The influence of scientific method on psychology was paralleled by the influence of technological thinking upon education. Likewise, the very democracy of the Western World led to a need for a democratic way to sort out individuals (James L. Wardrop: 1976: 12).

From the Army Alpha Test came the impetus to use tests that could be scored by clerks or, later, machines, rather than by teachers. The essay achievement tests of college entrance persisted through the 1930s, but by the end of World War II, the achievement tests had become predominantly objective. In English language tests there remained a desire on the part of the examiners to have the students actually write an essay which would then be graded even though various studies showed that multiple-choice questions dealing with matters of language and usage predicted writing scores accurately (Fred et al: 1966). However, Banesh Hoffmann, whose *Tyranny of Testing* appeared in 1962, criticised multiple-choice tests and claimed that they were unfair to the able student, because the logic of many of the questions was such that the mediocre response was correct, rather than the brilliant one.

Language testing today reflects current interests in teaching genuine communication, but it also reflects earlier concerns of scientifically sound tests. It started as basically intuitive, or subjective and dependent on the personal impressions of teachers. After the intuitive stage, testing entered a scientific stage, a time that stressed objective evaluation by language specialists. We are now in a communicative stage, a time when we emphasize evaluation of language use rather than language form (Harold S. Madson: 1983: 5 – 6).

2.5. The Classification of Tests

Harold S. Madson (1983: 8 – 9) has well summarized the classes of tests as shown in the table below:

Table(1): Contrasting Categories of ESL Tests

Knowledge Tests	Performance (or skills) Tests
Subjective Tests	Objective Tests
Productive Tests	Receptive Tests
Language Subskill Tests	Communication Skills Tests
Discrete-Point Tests	Integrative Tests
Proficiency Tests	Achievement Tests
Norm-referenced Tests	Criterion-referenced Tests

First, tests of knowledge are used in various school subjects, from maths and geography to literature and language. While ESL knowledge exams show how well students know facts about the language, ESL performance exams show how well a student can use the language.

This classification reminds us of the distinction that Chomsky (1965: 4) has drawn in his book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* between competence (The

speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language), and performance, the actual use of the language in concrete situations.

The second contrast shown in the table is that of subjective and objective examinations. Subjective tests, like translation and essay, have the advantage of measuring language skill naturally, almost the way English is used in real life. However, many teachers are not to score such tests quickly and consistently. By contrast, objective exams, such as multiple-choice or matching tests, can be scored quickly and consistently.

Productive measures, like speaking exams, require active or creative answers, while receptive measures, like multiple-choice reading tests, tend to rely on recognition, with students simply choosing the letter of the best answer.

Tests of language subskills measure the separate components of English such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Communication skills tests, on the other hand, show how well students can use the language in actually exchanging ideas and information.

Still another pair of categories is that of discrete-point exams, in which each item tests something very specific such as a preposition or a vocabulary item; and integrative tests— those like dictation— that combine various language subskills much the way we do when we communicate in real life.

Proficiency tests can measure overall mastery of English or how well prepared one is to use English in a particular setting. Achievement tests simply measure progress in mastery of the skills presented in an entire language text or course.

Finally, norm-referenced tests compare each student with his classmates (most classroom tests are like this). But criterion-referenced exams rate students against certain standards, regardless of how other students do.

It should be apparent that several labels can be applied to any one test. But it is normal to apply only one pair of labels at a time, just as we do in reference to an individual who might simultaneously be a friend, lawyer, husband ... etc.

2.6. The Purpose of Testing

Before a language test is supposedly be planned, its purpose or function should be established. Language tests have many uses in educational programmes and quite often the same test will be used for two or more related purposes (D. Harris: 1969: pp 2 – 4).

The following list summarises the chief objectives of language testing:

1. To determine readiness for instructional programmes. Such selection tests have a single cut off point: examinees either pass or fail, and the degree of success or failure may not be deemed important.
2. To classify or place individuals in appropriate language classes so that examinees may be assigned to specific sections or activities on the basis of their current level of competence. Such tests may make no pass-fail distinctions, since some kind of training is offered to every one.
3. To diagnose the individual's specific strengths and weaknesses. Diagnostic screening tests generally consist of several short but reliable subtests measuring different language skills or components of single broad skill.

4. To measure aptitude for learning. At the time of testing, the examinees may have little or no knowledge of the language to be studied, and the test is employed to assess their potential.
5. To measure the extent of student achievement of the instructional goals. The researcher has explained a lot about achievement tests previously.
6. To evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Such tests are used exclusively to assess the degree of success not of individuals but of the instructional programme itself.

To sum up, the above purposes can be grouped under three categories of tests: aptitude, general proficiency and achievement tests.

2.7. Communicative Language Testing

The communicative movement in ELT encompasses all modes of language use. It has, as one of its bases, a concept of what it means to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations. One of the earliest terms of this concept was 'communicative competence' which was thoroughly discussed by Hymes. Building on the work of Hymes, Canale and Swain examined the nature of communicative competence, identifying elements of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and later discourse competence, and the need to assess all these components. Similarly influential was Bachman's model of communicative language ability (Tricia: 2003: p 45, p 379).

Communicative language tests ultimately came to have two features (Tim McNamara: pp 16 – 17):

1. They were performance tests, requiring assessment to be carried out when the learner or candidate was engaged in an extended act of communication, either receptive or productive, or both.
2. They paid attention to the social roles candidates were likely to assume in real world settings, and offered a means of specifying the demands of such roles in detail.

The second of these features distinguishes communicative language tests from the integrative pragmatic testing tradition. The theory of communicative competence represented a profound shift from a psychological perspective on language, which sees language as an internal phenomenon, to a sociological one, focusing on the external, social functions of language.

It is clear that communicative language testing constitutes a form of task-based assessment (Rod Ellis: 2004: P. 283). It prioritizes 'real-world tasks' on the grounds that these ensure authenticity and face validity. However, it is doubtful whether a task in a test can ever correspond exactly to a real-world task, i.e., whether content validity is achievable.

To what extent should we concentrate on testing the student's ability to handle elements of the language such as phonology, vocabulary and grammar and to what extent should we concentrate on testing the integrated skills? Our attitude towards this question must depend on both the level and the purpose of the test. If the testees have been learning English for only a relatively brief period, it is highly likely that we shall be chiefly concerned with the ability to handle the language elements correctly. Moreover, if the aim of the test is to sample as wide a field as

possible, a battery of tests of the language elements will be useful not only in providing a wide coverage of this ability but also in locating particular problem areas. However, at all levels except the most elementary, it is generally advisable to include test items which measure the ability to communicate in the target language. Too great concentration on the testing of the language elements may indeed have a harmful effect on the communicative teaching of the language (J. B. Heaton: 1975: P 6). However, should we, therefore, purge all discrete-point diagnostic testing from our practice? Wilga M. Rivers (1988: P. 125) claims that "To do so we would be as foolish as tossing aside each succeeding teaching methodology in favour of the latest revolutionary approach. Many of our tried and true tests will continue to serve us well ... All testing techniques offer elements that can be integrated into useful tests for evaluating communicative command of the target language."

In conclusion, communicative tests should measure more than isolated language skills. They need to deal with language as an overall unified body of elements that work together in order to serve one goal – communication as it actually occurs in real-world situations.

2.8. The Difference between Tests and Practice Materials

The researcher would want to shed some light on the difference between test materials and practice materials as he believes that too much use and inclusion of the latter in achievement tests will affect the fairness of these tests. The exaggerated exploitation of the materials of the students' textbooks in tests is not recommended as it makes the practice of testing the language very much like that of any other subject.

The practice of testing is an inseparable part of the learning process, because almost every sort of practice a learner does in the language comprises some kind of assessment. Hubbard (2000 – P 255) states that "because of this constant test presence, there is not always an obvious difference between test and practice material The word purpose gives us our clue in attempting to distinguish between exercises and tests."

However, looking at any miscellaneous collection of practice materials or class activities will reveal that each of these materials or activities intends to consolidate a specific language area so that the learner is familiarized with it. The degree of complexity varies according to the level of mastery the students are hoped to reach. In one situation, the students might be required to recall a rule previously learned. In another, they might be expected to produce a certain structure or they might just be wanted to recognize something. These activities are for the most part guided by the teacher at varying degrees of control. The purpose of assessment in such activities usually stresses more directly the learning process rather than just giving a feedback. This argument can be supported by Bachman (2000: P 19), "The main difference between tests and other components of an instructional programme, in our view, is in their purpose. While the primary purpose of other components is to promote learning, the primary purpose of tests is to measure." Therefore, in order for the test materials to fairly measure, they should carefully be constructed or chosen and not merely taken from the students' textbooks so as to eliminate the hazards of rote learning and blind dependence on the course materials.

2.9. Cloze Tests

The researcher is convinced that it is very important to give cloze tests a separate title, because such kind of test is included in the questions of the (SSSC) English Exam and given a weight of (10) marks. Furthermore, a number of meritorious features characterize cloze tests.

A cloze test (a term taken from Gestalt psychology) is based on a passage from which every n^{th} word has been deleted. It is again a global (integrative) test which requires perceptive and productive skills and an underlying knowledge of lexical and grammatical systems since both content words and structural words have to be provided. The student does not just rely on linguistic clues, of course; he relies also on semantic clues and on what he believes to be appropriate in particular contexts (Hubbard et al: P 278).

The n^{th} word in the test usually varies from 5^{th} to 10^{th} and it is usually the case that the closer the deletions came in a text, the more difficult the test. However, the nature of the text is very relevant, some texts have a very high degree of lexical density or, in other words, have little redundancy. They are more concentrated, with more words carrying significant meaning (Ibid). In achievement tests, with cloze-type questions, of intermediate level like that of the (SSSC) English Exam, the deletions of words should not occur so close that they might impede the students' ability to deal with them. The students should be given a text extended enough before they are asked to provide the omitted word.

It was argued that a cloze test was an appropriate substitute for a test of productive skills, however; unfortunately, further work soon showed that cloze tests

on the whole seemed mostly to be measuring the same kinds of things as discrete point tests of grammar and vocabulary. It seems that there are no short cuts in the testing of communicative skills (McNamara: pp. 15 – 16).

Nevertheless, cloze tests are popular, easy to prepare and rather easy to score (Harold S. Madsen: p. 47). Moreover, they are based on a compelling theory of language use, and seemed an attractive alternative to more elaborate and expensive tests of the productive skills of speaking and writing (McNamara: p. 16). Besides, many experimental studies proved that correlations between the cloze test and other language achievement measures provided a useful measure of overall second language proficiency in favour of cloze test (Adedibu Ojerinde: ELT Journal: Oct. 1980: pp 62 – 65). That is to say cloze tests are very much a reliable means of measurement with possibility for giving useful insight about language proficiency.

2.10. Test Validation in the light of Bachman and Palmer's Approach

The researcher has carried out this study using the approach of Lyle F. Bachman and Adrian S. Palmer to language testing (2000). The two experts based their approach on the following tenets:

1. Language testing should be related to language teaching and language use.
2. Tests should be designed in a way that encourages and enables test-takers to perform at their highest level of ability.
3. Considerations of fairness should be built into test design.
4. Testing process should be humanized; i.e, ways should be sought to involve test takers more directly in the testing process.
5. Accountability for test should be demanded.

6. The fact that decisions based on test scores are fraught with dilemmas should be recognized.

Bachman and Palmer argue that all test development and use should be informed by a model of test usefulness (2000: P. 17). Their model to usefulness can be expressed as follows:

Usefulness: Reliability + Construct validity + Authenticity + Interactiveness + Impact + Practicality.

Reliability can be defined as consistency of measurement.

Construct validity pertains to the meaningfulness and appropriateness of the interpretations that we make on the basis of test scores, it is therefore used to refer to the extent to which we can interpret a given test score as an indicator of the ability (ies) we want to measure and then generalize this interpretation beyond the testing situation itself to particular Target Language Use (TLU) domain.

Authenticity is defined as the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a TLU task.

Interactiveness refer to the extent and type of involvement of the test taker's individual characteristics in accomplishing a test task. The individual characteristics that are most relevant for language testing are the test taker's language ability (language knowledge and strategic competence, or metacognitive strategies), topical knowledge and affective schemata.

Bachman and Palmer argue that authenticity and interactiveness must be considered essential to language tests if these tests are to reflect current views about the nature of language use, language learning, and language teaching. At the same

time, however, the minimum acceptable levels for authenticity and interactiveness must be balanced with those for the other test qualities (P. 29).

Impact refers to the effect of tests on society and educational system and the individuals within those systems. Bachman points out that (1990: P 279) "tests are not developed and used in a value-free psychometric test-tube; they are virtually always intended to serve the needs of an educational system or of society at large." When this impact comes to be on the learning and instruction processes, it is then known as washback. Bachman and Palmer consider washback within the scope of impact (2000: P 30). Therefore, washback is far more complex and thorny than simply the effect of testing on teaching and learning.

Practicality pertains to the ways in which the test will be implemented in a given situation. It refers to the relationship between the resources (Human resources, material resources and time) required for implementing the test and the resources available for it.

Evaluating the overall usefulness of a given test is essentially subjective, since this involves value judgments. In a large-scale test that will be used for making important decisions about large numbers of individuals, for example, the test developer may want to design the test and test tasks so as to achieve the highest possible levels of reliability and validity. (The two are called essential measurement qualities as they are critical for tests). In a classroom test, on the other hand, the teacher may want to utilize test tasks that will provide higher degrees of authenticity, interactiveness and impact (P. 19).

Bachman and Palmer's approach to check for usefulness provides these useful hints (P. 18):

1. It is the overall usefulness that is to be maximized, rather than the individual qualities that affect usefulness.
2. The individual test qualities cannot be evaluated independently, but must be evaluated in terms of their combined effect.
3. Test usefulness and the appropriate balance among the different qualities cannot be prescribed in general, but must be determined for each specific testing situation.

In conclusion this approach of Bachman and Palmer incorporates recent research in language testing and language teaching, and is based on two fundamental principles:

- A clear and explicit definition of the qualities of test usefulness.
- The need for a correspondence between language test performance and language use, i.e., test performance must correspond in demonstrable ways to language use in non-test situations.

2.11. The Objectives of Teaching English in the SPINE Series

According to the SPINE teacher's books (4), (5) and (6), it can be stated that the SPINE student's books claim to aim at giving the pupils what they need in terms of knowledge (grammar, vocabulary ... etc) and opportunities for use (exercises, activities, games etc) in order to become competent in communicating in English using the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. A basic

question, as clearly stated in the teacher's book of SPINE (4), for the course writers and for the teachers is, therefore:

What must I get my students to do so that they learn to communicate effectively?

It is further reinforced (P. 3): "Pupils have not mastered language or any area of language until they can use it spontaneously and it is that spontaneous use that is the real test of their ability."

In the teacher's book of SPINE (5), the general aims of the book work towards enabling the pupils by the end of the book to have

- a. recycled and reinforced previously learned language.
- b. developed further the four language skills with special emphasis on reading and writing.
- c. learned to understand and use English which is relevant to their needs and will help them to communicate in English with adequate accuracy and fluency in social, work and study situations.
- d. come to appreciate the ability of communicating in English and enjoy the experience of language learning.

The same objectives have been emphasized in the teacher's book of SPINE (6) (P. 5). Thus, the key features of the SPINE series state that

1. the SPINE series is a communicative syllabus.
2. the series cater for the student's future needs.
3. the 4 language skills should be tackled in integration with special emphasis on reading and writing.

4. creative and active involvement of both teachers and students is of a paramount importance.
5. the materials in the series are well recycled.
6. the SPINE books cater for maintaining a high level of motivation.

To sum up, we needn't ensure the importance of reflecting the above features in the (SSSC) English Exams which should measure whether these ambitious objectives have been achieved.

2.12. Test Rating

After being taken by the students, tests should be handed over for marking which is usually carried out within the framework of a clear marking scheme.

Some questions can be marked objectively, i.e., there is only one answer which the students can either get right or wrong. MCQs attain a high degree of fairness as there is usually only one correct answer; however when raters come to assess a piece of writing (composition or a summary), different marks may be given for the very same answer.

The problem with raters is that rating is necessarily subjective and the rating process may be affected by the likes and dislikes of the rater. Furthermore, raters have different levels of knowledge, qualification and experience. The mood at the time of rating may differ from a person to another and from time to time for the same person. Besides, rating can be holistic or analytic according to which marking scheme is adopted. However, training raters is of a paramount importance so as to eliminate or at least reduce the variations which are likely to occur. Tim McNamara

(2000: p 44) stresses that "Ongoing monitoring of rater performance is clearly necessary to ensure fairness in the testing process."

The raters who join the rating process in the (SSSC) English Exams are trained and experienced and the monitoring system enables the novice raters to acquire the skills required for good performance. We do assume that the selection process guarantees fair or at least reasonable results. Nevertheless, the square root system which is used to upgrade the final results of the students may have its harmful effects on the fairness and discriminating value of the exam.

2.13. Previous Studies on the Topic

As there are only very few researches conducted in this topic in the Sudan, investigating and analyzing (SSSC) English Exams remains a virgin field which requires great efforts and much attention.

The pioneering study in this topic is the Ph. D thesis submitted by Ahmed Guma'a Siddiek, titled "Analysis and Evaluation of the Sudan School Certificate English Examinations From 2000 To 2003" at Omdurman Islamic University (2004).

The researcher has found many pitfalls in these exams, judging that (SSSC) English Exams do not reflect the truth about the Sudanese students' performance in English and that they lack content validity and hence do not represent a good standardized achievement test. The difference between Guma'a's research and this one is in the period of time. This one covers the period from (2004 – 2007), therefore it complements Guma'a's work.

Another study is an M. A thesis submitted by Othman Hammad Mohammed Al-Traieh, titled "Assessment of the Criteria Used for Evaluating the Current EFL Testing System with Special Reference to EAP and ESP Programme at the University of Khartoum – Sudan." at the U. of K., April 1998.

This study is irrelevant to the topic we are dealing with as it pertains to English for Academic Purposes at university level.

3.14. Summary

In this chapter the researcher has tried as much as the space has allowed to trace the framework of language testing starting with defining terms and making distinctions between confused terms. The purpose of language testing and the objectives of the SPINE have been covered. The history of the development of language testing has been outlined beginning with the intuitive period, going through the scientific period and finally the communicative period. The model of Bachman and Palmer's approach has been discussed and special reference to previous studies has also been made.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter the methodology used in the research will be explained. The researcher has used the descriptive analytical approach to tackle the research issues. Different tools and techniques have been used in the study such as questionnaire, personal interview and difficulty measures. A battery of the (SSSC) English Exams (2004 – 2007) have been used and put under analysis.

3.2. The Questionnaire

The researcher has designed a questionnaire to find out about the different aspects to the (SSSC) English Exams (2004 – 2007). The questionnaire consists of five sections testing the five research hypotheses. It also includes a section for personal details about the respondents. The overall number of items included in the questionnaire is 60 items distributed in the five sections as follows:

Table (2): Distribution of the Questionnaire Statements

Section	Hypothesis	No. of items
(1)	The questions of the SSSC Exams are repeated, predictable and insensitive to the students' language ability	12
(2)	The questions of the SSSC English Exams are relevant to the SPINE books but do not cater for the students' future needs	16
(3)	The upgrading process that occurs to the students' scores discourages both students and teachers to do at their best	9
(4)	The questions of the SSSC English Exams are more related to SPINE (5) than they are to SPINE (6)	10
(5)	The SSSC English Exam attains a very low degree of usefulness	13
Total Items Number		60

3.2.1. Description of Population

The questionnaire has targeted the teachers of secondary level who assembled in Khartoum to join the marking process of the students' papers of (SSSC) English Exam of the year 2006 – 2007. The marking process was carried out in May 2007. There were 350 teachers who came from all over the country to do that job. They had varying degrees of experience and qualifications; among them were supervisors as well as novice teachers (28% of the total number) whose experiences range between (1 – 5) years.

3.2.2. The Sample

The researcher prepared 100 copies of the questionnaire to be distributed in the compounds where the rating process was done. Some of the copies were

distributed during the break and immediately returned and some were returned later the next day. The researcher has increased the number of the copies to overcome the problem that some might not be returned. 75 valid copies were returned which means (21%) of the population have been included in the sample.

3.2.3. Data Processing

The computer has been used to process the data through Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) which resulted in tables calculating frequencies and percentages of the responses in support of the options given in the questionnaire for each statement.

3.2.4. Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the questionnaire has been measured by using the split-half method which has provided the following results:

Correlation between forms = .5270

Equal-length Spearman-Brown = .6903

Guttman split-half = .6839

Unequal-length Spearman - Brown = .6903

30 items in Part (1) & 30 items in Part (2)

Alpha for Part (1) = .7707 Alpha for Part (2) = .8061

Then Alpha is .8597 \longrightarrow (86%)

(86%) is a good percentage on which reliable judgments can be made.

3.2.5. Validity

The questionnaire used in the study has proved to be a valid tool. It has been approved by a board of referees who work as university professors. The board consists of 4 members. (See Appendices)

3.3. Interview

The interview with Ustaz Al Musbah was made on May 1st, 2007 in Khartoum, where the teachers from all over the country assembled to mark the SSSC English Exam of March 2007.

It is worth mentioning that Mr. Al Musbah was responsible for constructing the questions of the 2007 English Exam and that he has contributed to the designing of the SSSC English Exams since 2000 when the new form of the current English Exam was suggested to replace the old one. Mr. Al Musbah was a teacher with a long expertise in ELT (English Language Teaching) and was one of the committee of experts who wrote and adapted the materials of the SPINE series. Besides, he now – after retirement – works as an advisor in the Sudan National Center for Curriculums as well as a lecturer in the Faculty of Education in the University of Bakht Al- Ruda.

Some of the questions of the interview were prepared prior to meeting Mr. Al Musbah; others came out through the course of his speech. His brilliant answers shed light on some important issues of the (SSSC) English Exam, syllabus, learners and English language learning in general.

3.4. Difficulty Measures

The measurement of complexity is a very important aspect of the construction of any language test because it influences test dimensionality (Oltman et al., 1988; Hale et al., 1989).

The researcher has applied different concepts and techniques to measure the readability and rate of difficulty in the texts used for comprehension and summary in the SSSC English Exams and has applied the same techniques to measure the rate of complexity in parallel texts taken from the student's textbooks (SPINE). The texts from the SPINE are related to the texts used in the examination papers. These techniques are lexical density, lexical sophistication and lexical variety.

3.4.1. Lexical Density

It is a measure of the proportion of content words in a text. Content words – as opposed to function words – are words that carry a high information load such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs.

3.4.2. Lexical Variety

It is a measure of the different words in the text; excluding repeated words. A high proportion of different words is an indicator of extensive vocabulary.

3.4.3. Lexical Sophistication

It is assessed by counting the number of relatively infrequent words in a text– such as the number of words that fall outside the list of the top 2.000 most frequent words.

To check for the above three concepts of complexity measure, please refer to Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1987), (H. Douglas Brown: 2001) and (Ure: 1971) and others.

Tables and graphs have been used to measure text difficulty in the SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007) which is then to be compared with parallel texts from the SPINE books. As for the top 2000 most frequent words, the list of Michael West's pedagogical Dictionary "The New Method English Dictionary (1985)" has been used by the researcher.

3.5. Bachman and Palmer's Approach

The statements of the questionnaire and the questions of the interview have been designed according to the tenets of Bachman and Palmer's approach in language testing.

3.6. The Battery of Tests

The researcher has used the examination papers of the (SSSC) English Exams of the period (2004 – 2007). A general description and critical analysis have been made by using these papers.

CHAPTRE FOUR
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

CHAPTRE FOUR

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this chapter a general description and analysis of the SSSC English Exams (2004-2007) as well as the statistical analysis of the questionnaire will be presented.

Moreover, the data collected through the interview with Ustaz Musbah will be discussed and the complexity or difficulty measures of the comprehension and summary passages of the SSSC English Exams will be dealt with.

4.1. Comments on the (SSSC) English Exams (2004 – 2007)

4.1.1. General Description of the Examination Paper

Sudanese students sit for the (SSSC) Exams by the end of the third year of secondary stage and they get into competition in order to go to university or higher institutes. Therefore, they are high-stakes tests and English is one of the subjects which the students should pass to qualify for the competition and find access to higher education.

The researcher will describe and go through the content of the English examination papers within the period (2004 – 2007). The papers generally test the language abilities listed below and the weights and marks distribution are given together with each question (Technical Guide for Sudan Certificate Exams : 2006).

- a. Comprehension : 30 marks
 - b. Summary : 15 marks
 - c. Language : 40 marks
 - d. Composition : 15 marks
- (Time allotted for the paper: 3 Hours)

This plan of the question type and marks distribution is typical of the exams 2005 , 2006 and 2007, while 2004 is a little different. The subquestions of the language section comprise the following:

- a. Tenses : 10 marks
- b. Affixes : 10 marks
- c. Gap-filling (cloze test) : 10 marks
- d. Transformational items : 10 marks

As for the tenses, the test-takers are required to put the verbs in brackets in their correct forms. Although this question is designed to test the tenses as a main target, examinees may come across questions examining forms other than the tenses like the gerund, imperatives and present participle. The questions are usually given in very short contexts and at times isolated single sentences. All the forms tested are related to the syllabus and the questions are straightforward.

The affixes are further subdivided into two questions. In the one testees are required to use the word at the end of each sentence to form a word that fits in the space and a list of five suffixes is given from which the students add to the words and use the new words to finish the five sentences. In the other subquestion, the same should be done with five sentences; however this time the testees are given prefixes. Both questions are quite straightforward and the words given are usually from the frequent.

In the cloze-test, examinees are given a paragraph of about (50 – 60) words from which ten has been taken out and provided as a list which the students should use to fill in the blanks. The list of words mostly comprises a set of nouns and very

few verbs, adverbs and adjectives. Prepositions are completely missed out– except for a single one (about) in the examination of 2004.

In transformational items, a variety of constructions are tested at sentence level. The testees are asked to rewrite sentence (B) so that it has a similar meaning to sentence (A), reminded that they must use from two to five words in each space. Usually a key word in the margin is suggested for the students to use in order to rewrite the sentence. Among the tested patterns are the passive voice, indirect speech, comparisons, concession and other clauses. The question requires grammatical competence and tests the students' mastery of language structures, however its scoring might get subjective at times as there may be more than one correct answer. Also, many subskills are involved in the question such as spelling, vocabulary, grammar and sentence order.

Comprehension as a macro skill is given the largest marks (30). It well deserves it. The students are provided with a short passage which ranges between (120 – 160) words. After reading it carefully, they should answer (15) questions. This is the case for the exams of the years 2005 , 2006 and 2007. The questions are divided into two groups: (5) open-ended questions and 10 multiple-choice questions where the students are required to draw a circle round the best alternative A, B, C, or D. Some of the questions ask about specific information, while others are meant to test global understanding and inference.

As for the summary, the students are supplied with texts related to the topics of the SPINE books. The texts have varying lengths (149 , 111 , 89 words) for the examinations of the years 2005 , 2006 , 2007 respectively. There is an observable

tendency to reduce the length of the passages. Two questions follow the passage and the students have to limit their summaries to not more than 20 or 15 words as indicated in the questions.

The last question (question (4)) is usually the composition. The topic the students are asked to write about is restricted by the limit of 120 words as minimum task requirement and 180 words as maximum. The testees are usually reminded that their compositions should contain the ideas given in the paper, but may add to them. Usually there is a brief introduction or comment intended to contextualise the task. Then a clear, enough guide of words, phrases and clauses about the topic is given for help. An empty page of more than thirty lines is left as a space for the student's answer. Surprisingly, all the topics that came in the examinations for writing the composition are related to SPINE (5) and not SPINE (6). Below are the composition topics of the exams and the related materials and topics of SPINE (5) where they have been extracted:

1. Paper Two (2004): Income-generating Business.

Refer to SPINE (5) (PP 1 – 2).

2. 2005: Changes and Improvement in your Town / Village.

SPINE (5) (P. 33)

3. 2006: Communal and Collective Work in your Village.

SPINE (5) (P. 5, PP. 53-55)

4. 2007: A Picnic to a Farm Near the River

SPINE (5) (PP. 134 – 136)

Hint:

The composition of 2006 suggests that the student lives in a village. There is not even a choice to whether the student might be living in a town or elsewhere abroad. This topic is biased for rural students against urban students. Some students take the (SSSC) Exams abroad in countries like Saudi Arabia and might have never experienced participating in a communal work in a village.

The above description shows how the examination papers of 2005 , 2006 and 2007 are arranged. With regard to 2004, the students sat for two separate papers (50 marks each and two-hours time for each).

Paper one is composed of a guided composition (15 marks), two separate reading passages (10 marks each), tenses (7 marks). One of the two reading passages is followed by ten open-ended questions, while the other comprises seven MCQs and again (3) open-ended questions. Only 20 marks is allotted to comprehension, unlike the examinations of the years 2005, 2006 and 2007 where comprehension receives (30) marks.

In paper Two of the same exam, the students are asked to write a formal letter to the Minister of Social Affairs asking for a loan to start a small income-generating business. Again 15 marks are devoted to the writing task. Thus, the total marks of the writing skill in the examination of 2004 becomes 30 marks.

Summary gets (15) marks and the students are given three different paragraphs (5 marks each). The students should summarize each one in not more than 20 or 25 words. It is strange enough that each paragraph is entitled as a passage!! Teachers

spend a lot of time helping their students to distinguish between a paragraph and a passage, while in the examination paper (2004, paper (2)) a paragraph is named a passage. Such a technical fault might lead the students to question the validity of the exam.

Paper (2) of 2004 also includes a cloze test (12 marks) and a question on the suffixes (8 marks), yet no prefixes appear in the examination paper at all.

It is worth mentioning that the drastic change of the amalgamation of the two papers into one paper started with the examination of 2005 in the aftermath of the crisis of the leakage and abolition of the 2003 (SSSC) Exams. English, Arabic and Mathematics—all of them—subjected to this change and now the students sit for one instead of two papers as a security measure and for some reasons related to examination economies.

4.1.2. Criticism of the (SSSC) English Exams (2004-2007)

4.1.2.1. The (SSSC) English Exams: Technical And Language Faults

There are several technical and language faults in the (SSSC) English Exams (2004 – 2007), although a high-stake achievement test of such kind must provide a model of perfection and correctness.

The researcher has counted a number of such faults as shown below:

1. A paragraph is introduced to the students as a passage. This mistake has been spotted out in the summary question of paper (2) 2004. Each of the three paragraphs is entitled as a passage.
2. In the cloze-test of the same paper (Paper (2) 2004) the pronoun 'He' in the list of words is capitalised and that gives the examinees an explicit clue which

suggests using the pronoun after the full stop. Moreover, the students are asked to fill in two gaps separated by only one word. This makes the test much difficult as there is not enough context and that the words are not deleted systematically.

3. As for the cloze-test of 2005, two words of the given list can substitute each other in the spaces provided for them. If we refer to the question, we will find it this way: "such as fats, , minerals and ". The students are free to put the words from the list 'proteins' and 'vitamins' wherever they like and it is possible that the students can get the answer correct by chance since the word has two possible spaces to go in. Also, the plural forms of the words fats and minerals give the students a clue to put the words 'proteins' and 'vitamins' in the spaces where they can be grouped with the other plural nouns.
4. Referring to the transformational items in 'paper one' 2004 and in 2007, the students are restricted that they must use from two to five words in each space, while question (4) in 2004 and question (3) and (4) in 2007 cannot be answered unless the students use seven, eight and seven words for each question respectively. Here is an example from paper (1) 2004:

A : It was such tasty food that I ate it all.

So B : The food all.

Model Answer: was so tasty that I ate it. (7 words!!)

5. Referring to 2007, question (C) (tenses), a question mark is mistakenly missed out for a 'full stop' in the following polite request:

It is hot. Would you mind (open) the window.

6. The rubric of the above question ((C) tenses, 2007) has been given this way:
Put the verbs in brackets in their correct form. The missing (s) of the word 'form' suggests that all the verbs have one form!
7. The rubrics of question (B) in the language section are poorly written. Look at this example from (2005):

Read the sentences below. Use the words at the end of each sentence to form a word that fits in the space. Use the following endings:

Another Example from (2007) suggests:

Use the words at the end of each sentence to form a word that fits in the space. Use one of the following prefixes BEFORE each word.

It is unnecessary to tell the students that they have to use the prefixes BEFORE the words since the term itself suggests this. Furthermore it is needless to use such a technical term. A simple model which shows how the students can use the word will save the examiner all that trouble. Let us have a look at this rubric taken from a Cambridge Exam (Geoffrey Land: 1990: P 8):

The word in capitals at the end of the following sentences can be used to form a word that fits suitably in the blank space. Fill each blank in this way.

Example:

She smiled happily when she heard the good news. (HAPPY)

8. If you refer to Paper One (2004), you will find 'cannot' in the sixth line of the comprehension passage (A) written with a space: 'can not'—the mistake we, as teachers, insist to eliminate from the list of our students' bad mechanical mistakes of handwriting.

Referring to the same passage, the first sentence the students encounter reveals a historical fallacy or anachronism as it states: "Since the beginning of time man depended on coal, oil and gas as sources of energy." It is not until recently that man has used oil and gas, while coal was associated with the industrial revolution in Europe. How could it be asserted that these sources of energy have been used since the beginning of time? The language of the exam should carefully be written and should never contradict with the basic knowledge the students may learn from the other disciplines. The researcher needn't draw the attention to the grammatical mistake that has occurred by using 'since' with the past simple instead of the present perfect, another language mistake which brilliant students can detect easily.

9. Referring to another comprehension passage – that of the year 2007 – will support the researcher's point about the haphazard use of the language in the (SSSC) English Exams. The passage is about the Baggara tribes and it suggests that, "They move about north and south according to the weather conditions"

Question (5) as an MCQ reads as follows:

They move about according to

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| A. the weather conditions | B. their search for food |
| C. the tribal rules. | D. the seasons. |

Both (A) and (D) are correct, though the poor up-lift (A) is considered the model answer. The brilliant student may think deeper and choose (D) as the change of seasons involves a change in the weather conditions. The geographical piece of information the students have learned from their very textbook SPINE (5) states

that with the fall of rains in the south, the Baggara will start to shift northwards to avoid the insects and the diseases they cause. As autumn strikes northwards, the Baggara will move in the same direction according to the change in the season. Such questions will favour the mediocre student against the brilliant one.

10. A general look at the MCQs in the comprehension section will display that the correct answer tends to be the longest option. This is generally not preferable since the students –as from the researcher's own experience– usually think the longest is the best answer, especially when they are confused between two options. For example, to support this point, one may just need to refer to question (1) , (2) , (7) and (9) of 2007; question (7) of 2006; question (3), (4) and (10) of 2005; and question (4) in paper one of 2004.

In addition, we may also come across a number of questions which seem different but, in fact, ask about the same thing. The worst example is that question (7) and (8) of 2006 (comprehension) ask about the same thing– option (C) being the correct answer in both!!

4.1.2.2. (SSSC)English Exams: Repeatedness And Lack of Creativity

It is a general feature that many of the materials and questions of the English examinations (2004 – 2007) are repeated and overused. The questions are frequently taken or borrowed from previous exams. It is quite enough to review some examples to support such claim. For instance, passage (A) in question two (comprehension), 2004, which is about the renewable and non-renewable sources of power is later repeated as the comprehension passage of 2006. The questions are almost the same and very little rewording occurred in the passage and questions, let alone that the

passage itself is the main theme of chapter (10) of SPINE (6). Such practice will affect the validity and reliability of the exam and will for sure spoil the reputation of the (SSSC) English Exam as a standardized achievement test.

The text used for the summary question (2006), which is a comparison between the radio and TV, has partially been used in the summary question of 2004 (paper 2).

As for the transformational items, we frequently encounter repeated questions. Let us look at these examples:

1. A : We went out in spite of the rain.

Although B : We went out

Paper (1) (2004)

2. A : We went out although it was raining.

In spite of B : We went out

(2005)

3. A : It was raining, yet we went out.

Although B :, we went out.

(2006)

4. A : Although it was raining, we went out.

In spite B : We went out

(2007)

There is no obvious good reason for this repetition which the students come through every year. Why is it that the examiner insists on testing contrast and concession using the same example over four successive years? It sounds as though

testing concession could never be possible unless it is autumn or when it is raining!
In fact, we need creative tests which can display good and rich language as well as make the practice of language testing a fun and not a practice which brings boredom and encourages rote learning.

Here are more examples:

1. A : We will miss the bus if we don't hurry.

unless B :, we will miss the bus.

(2005)

2. A : Unless we hurry we will miss the bus.

if B :, we will miss the bus.

(2006)

For more, refer to question (4) in 2004 and question (5) in 2007; and question (4) in 2006 and question (7) in paper (1) 2004. Although the sentences are different, the idea remains the same. There is a variety of language items which can be tested through transformational questions. There is no need to stress a few number of rules within a very short period of time and neglect so many others which the students learn from their SPINE books and badly need to improve their competences. This unjustifiable selectivity of a limited number of language areas may also affect the sampling and comprehensiveness of the test.

As for the question testing the tenses, it seems that certain adverbials or time indicators have become perpetual! Look at these examples:

1. While Ali (run) to school yesterday, a dog
..... (attack) him.

(2005)

2. While the boy (cycle) carelessly yesterday, a car
..... (knock) him off his bicycle.

(2006)

3. While I (walk) to the bank yesterday, I
(meet) a stranger.

(2007)

Why does the examiner insist on testing this rule with too much stress on "while" at the beginning of the sentence and "yesterday" at the end of the subordinate clause? Some students may infer that the positions of these time markers are obligatory and that the rule may not be true unless "while" is entwined with "yesterday." Why is it while and not "when" or "as"? Why is it "yesterday" and not "last week" or "two days ago" etc? Real language use in the (SSSC) English Exams should be enriched by diversifying our choices as for the vocabulary and language structures the students are exposed to in their textbooks so that we may secure the sensitivity of these tests as achievement tests to the students' varied language abilities.

4.2. The Statistical Analysis and Discussion of the Questionnaire

Results

(See frequency tables in the appendixes)

4.2.1. Testing Hypothesis (1):

The questions of the SSSC English Exams are repeated, predictable and insensitive to the students' language ability.

(21.3%) of the subjects strongly agree that the questions of the (SSSC) English Exams are repeated and (68%) of them just agree, while (1.3%) don't know and only (9.3%) don't agree. So, the researcher can say that the majority ($21.3\% + 68\% = 89.3\%$) believe that the questions are continuously repeated. As for the predictability of the (SSSC) English Exams, (13.3%) strongly agree and (60%) just agree, while (10.7%) don't know and (16%) disagree. That means a high percentage of the subjects ($13.3\% + 60\% = 73.3\%$) believe that the questions of the (SSSC) English Exams can be predicted, i.e., teachers and students can spot certain areas of the syllabus to work on. This predictability encourages selectivity which means ignoring, or at least giving less attention to, some parts of the subject. This makes the majority ($34.7\% + 54.7\% = 89.4\%$) believe that (SSSC) English Exams are easy and only less than (10%) disagree. The majority ($17.3\% + 78.7\% = 96\%$) believe that the questions of the (SSSC) English Exams come in short contexts. That means the amount of language used in the questions is limited and of course short context and little language use do not help test a wide range of language abilities. Therefore, ($25.3\% + 53.3\% = 78.6\%$) believe that the questions of the SSSC English are too simple, while (16.3%) don't agree and (4%) strongly disagree.

(38.7%) of the subjects strongly agree that the language of the questions of the SSSC English Exams is at the level of the SPINE books language and (53.3%) agree. That makes (92%) of the subjects in support of the statement. Since the materials, texts and language points tested in the SSSC English Exams are directly

extracted from or in some way related to the textbooks, there must be a high correlation between the language of the exam and that of the textbooks. Nothing irrelevant to the syllabus is tested in the examination paper. The SPINE textbooks comprise simple and recycled materials as well as relatively complicated materials, however if the exams always focus on the very simple points and do not include challenging tasks of varying degrees to discriminate between the students, that will be the problem of these exams and not the textbooks. Achievement tests should cover and reflect various language abilities and not just stress oversimplicity. And, when the subjects respond to whether the questions of the SSSC English Exams come at the expected level of difficulty, (4%) strongly agree and (41.3%) agree, while (42.7%) disagree and (5.3%) strongly disagree. This proposition is a controversial one since it can be dealt with at two levels. The first is that we can think of a presumed level of difficulty, i.e., at the theoretical level and that when we think of it as a continuum which depicts two extremes between them various degrees of difficulty can be spotted. That is what we expect an achievement test should do. However, the level of difficulty in a test is bound to a number of factors the most important of which is the actual level of language the tasters have. If the standard is low, we generally expect the tool of measurement, i.e., the test, to be designed to suit the standard to avoid severity of measurement and the undesirable and embarrassing low results. This notion can well be illustrated in the light of Bachman and Palmer's approach when they distinguish between the target language use domain, i.e., generalizing the test results interpretation beyond the testing situation, and the target language use task– the actual questions in the test. Although the questions of the

exam should be designed in consideration to what the students really know and are able to do, they should also help to give us insights about what the testees should be able to do in non-test situations.

(6.7% + 42.7% = 49.4%) believe that the language items sampled in the SSSC English Exams can assess the students' real language ability, while (36% + 8% = 44%) believe the opposite. That means only less than 50% trust the SSSC English Exam as a truthful tool of measurement to assess the students' real language ability. This is a very low percentage. At the same time, (40% + 22.7% = 62.7%) of the subjects believe that one paper is not enough to be used to test the students' language ability. Two examination papers can give more reliable test results, because the examiner can cover in them a wide range of language aspects.

(16% + 60% = 76%) of the subjects believe that the length and content of the SSSC English Examination Paper is suitable and (17.3% + 62.7% = 80%) believe that the time allotted to the SSSC English Examination suits the length and level of difficulty of the questions. (14.7% + 41.3% = 56%) believe that half the students can finish answering the questions of the exam in about two hours. If the time given for the examination is three hours and that half the students can finish in two hours, we suggest that there is no problem in the length and content of the questions as compared to the time allocated for doing the exam.

4.2.2. Testing Hypothesis (2):

The questions of the SSSC English Exams are relevant to the SPINE books, but do not cater for the students' future needs.

It is quite clear that the SSSC English Exams are relevant to the SPINE content and no alien materials extracted from other sources are used in the papers. (48%) of the subjects strongly agree that the questions of the SSSC English exams are based on what the students have studied in the SPINE books and (45.3%) agree, while (1.3%) don't know and only (5.3%) disagree. (36% + 60% = 96%) believe that the comprehension passages are related to the topics of the SPINE books, and (24% + 49.3% = 73.3%) believe the composition topics are related to the syllabus, while (4%) don't know, (20%) disagree and (2.7%) strongly disagree. But if we refer to SPINE (5), we will find that all the composition topics of the examination papers (2004–2007) are strongly related or at times merely copied from the SPINE books. The discrepancy between this fact and the responses of some of the subjects may be due to some factors. Some of the respondents may be teaching SPINE (6) only and rarely refer to SPINE (5). Some of them may be supervisors who have abandoned teaching for the last a few years or some may have even responded according to a prior opinion that a lot of external materials were once used in the SSSC English Exams before 2004. However, the composition topics of the SSSC English Exams during the period (2004 – 2007) are 100% from book (5) of the SPINE series.

As for the summary questions, (22.7%) strongly agree that they are related to the materials of the students' books and (65.3%) agree, while (12%) disagree and no uncertain response was given.

Regarding the grammar, (25.3%) strongly agree that the grammar items tested in the SSSC English Exams are related to the syllabus and (60%) agree, while (12% + 2.7% = 14.7%) believe the contrary.

Considering vocabulary, (34.7% + 49.3% = 84%) believe that the vocabulary items tested in the gap-filling, suffixes and prefixes questions are relevant to the syllabus.

In responding to whether the questions of the SSSC English Exams tell us about the students' future performance, (8%) of the subjects strongly agree, (32%) agree, (10.7%) don't know, (42.7%) disagree and (6.7%) strongly disagree. That means about (49.4%) believe that the students' performance in these exams does not guarantee that they can perform well when they go to university or work, while a considerable percentage of (10.4%) are skeptic and can't give a fixed opinion. So, only (40%) relate students' performance in SSSC English Exams to their future performance.

Comprehension questions should include a considerable number of inference questions. (14.7%) strongly agree that the comprehension questions assess the students' guessing ability, (45,3%) agree and (2.7%) strongly disagree. So, (60%) of the respondents think that guessing abilities are tested in the comprehension questions, but to what extent are they tested? That might be a separate task which needs thorough investigation so as to know about the quality of these upper skills and their matchability to the inference activities in the textbooks and whether they pave the way for these students for much more effective guessing performance in their future tasks. On the other hand, (8.7% + 56% = 64.7%) of the respondents believe that the length of the comprehension passages in the SSSC English Exams is usually appropriate. It is true the length might be appropriate to the time allotted for

the exam, but it does not, in fact, resemble the length of the reading passages in their SPINE books, particularly (5) and (6).

Only (6.7% + 6.7% = 13.4%) believe that the students can read and understand references in English effectively when they go to university, while (48% + 32% = 80%) believe the students cannot do that and (6.7%) remain uncertain. It is assumed that universities have their training programmes and approved systems which help their candidates acquire useful study skills among which reading strategies and reference use are common. However, these study skills courses alone are not enough and that the students need to establish useful reading skills on the basis of what they learn in their general education. The paradox is that the objectives stated for English language learning in the secondary level claim that the students learn to understand and use English which is relevant to their needs such as study situations with special emphasis on reading and writing.

As for the summary, (24% + 54.7% = 78.7%) believe that the summary passages in the SSSC English Exams are suitable in length, while (16% + 1.3% = 17.3%) disagree and (4%) are not sure. (12% + 58.7% = 70.7%) believe that the number of words required in the summary questions is comparatively appropriate to the length of the passage, while (20% + 2.7% = 22.7%) disagree and (6.7%) are not sure. (9.3% + 53.3% = 62.6%) believe that the summary questions of the SSSC English Exams check the students' ability in summary, while (28% + 4% = 32%) think the opposite and (5.3%) are uncertain. Nevertheless, only (5.3% + 16% = 21.3%) believe that the students can make good summaries when they go to

university, while ($9.3\% + 53.3\% = 62.6\%$) believe the students cannot and (16%) are not sure.

In the researcher's point of view, constructing a summary question is not a difficult task to do. Yet, whether it can assess the testee's ability that will depend on the testee's response. Creative students usually write excellent summaries out of whatsoever text it might be. The fulfillment of the limit of words required in the question also depends on the dexterity of the student answering the question. But at the same time a considerable percentage of the subjects (62.6%) believe that the students cannot write good summaries when they go to university. This will lead us to question the syllabus as well as the role of teaching. Here the test can help us to judge these two elements.

With reference to the writing skill in the SSSC English Exams, ($45.3\% + 42.7\% = 88\%$) of the subjects believe that the students cannot write meaningful and accurate compositions and only ($5.3\% + 5.3\% = 10.6\%$) believe that they can do, while (1.3%) are not sure. Again, this raises the questioning of both the curriculum and methodology, or even the whole educational system, or at least the system of English language learning in the whole country.

It is stated in the objectives of English language learning in the Sudan that the syllabus will help the students to communicate in English with adequate accuracy and fluency in social, work and study situations. So, it is claimed that SPINE is a communicative syllabus. When we come to verify this communicative feature in the students' performance in the SSSC English Exams, we find that only ($2.7\% + 18.7\% = 21.4\%$) believe that the questions of the SSSC English Exams can assess the

students' communicative ability. Of course, this is a very low percentage, while (45.3% + 29.3% = 74.6%) believe that they cannot assess the students' communicative ability and (4%) are not sure. So, what and who should we hold responsible?

4.2.3. Testing Hypothesis (3):

The upgrading process that occurs to the students' scores discourages both students and teachers to do at their best.

With regard to the marking scheme, the rating process is carried out according to specific criteria which are usually agreed upon before the marking begins. A model answer is usually given to the raters and they have to abide by it. So, the researcher assumes that rating the students answers goes according to fair and reasonably objective standards. Later the students grades are adjusted according to the square root system which means that the student's grade is put under the square root then multiplied by 10. If the student got, for example, 49 then it would be upgraded to 70. So, failure changes to good performance, while excellent students do not benefit from this system as weaker ones. A student who attains 94 will get 96, i.e., offered only two marks compared with 21 marks when the student's original grade is 49.

So, (18.7%) of the respondents strongly agree that the students get high marks in SSSC English Exams and (26.7%) agree. However, (45.3%) disagree and (6.7%) strongly disagree, while (2.7%) are not sure. This situation might be true at the first phase of rating. The respondents' opinions change when the statement suggests that

the high marks are achieved because the students are really good. Only (4% + 2.7% = 6.7%) believe that the students get high marks because they are really good, while (58.7% + 33.3% = 92%) believe the opposite, i.e., high marks do not indicate good performance. (5.3% + 18.7% = 24%) believe that the students get high marks because they work hard. Of course some students like hard work and love the subject which is why they get high marks. On the other hand, (57.3% + 17.3% = 74.6%) of the subjects believe that high marks are achieved not because of hard work. (1.3%) are not certain. Therefore, (44% + 17.3% = 61.3%) believe that the students' scores in the SSSC English Exams do not reflect their real language ability, while (13.3% + 20% = 33.3%) believe that the scores reflect the real language ability and (5.3%) do not know.

(24% + 44% = 68%) believe that the students get high marks because their scores are upgraded. (26.7%) do not believe so, and (5.3%) are not sure. (26.7% + 52% = 78.7%) believe that their students know that their scores in the SSSC English Exams are upgraded, (13.3%) disagree and (8%) are not sure. It is worth mentioning that some teachers purposefully do not tell their students about the square root system, because they want them to work hard and not to rely on it.

(37.3% + 42.7% = 80%) of the respondents believe that the square root system used in upgrading the students' scores in SSSC English Exams has discouraged the students from hard work. (10.7% + 4% = 14.7%) do not agree, while (5.3%) remain not sure. Furthermore, (20% + 34% = 54.7%) believe the square root system has discouraged teachers from hard work. However, (33.3% + 5.3% = 38.6%) disagree and (6.7%) do not know. It is obvious that teachers are less discouraged

than students as they aspire for achieving other objectives to help their students learn the language. They do not just teach for the exam and they want to set the model for their students. However, (54.7%) is not a trivial figure to neglect. Many teachers feel frustrated and that will for sure affect their performance.

According to the teachers' responses, we can conclude that the square root system has greatly damaged the learning of the English language. (37.7%) strongly support this argument, (34.7%) agree and (5.3%) are not sure. Only (14.7%) disagree and (6.7%) strongly disagree. So, (73.4%) of the respondents hold the square root system responsible for this damage. The other (21.4%) of them might bear in their mind other factors which might contribute to this deterioration.

4.2.4. Testing Hypothesis (4):

The questions of the SSSC English Exams are more related to SPINE (5) than they are to SPINE (6).

As for the relevance of the questions of the English Exams to SPINE (5) more than they are to SPINE (6), the respondents have given us very useful insights. The majority ($22.7\% + 62.7\% = 85.4\%$) believe that the SSSC English Exams reflect the content of SPINE (5), while ($10.7\% + 1.3\% = 12\%$) disagree and (2.7%) strongly disagree. ($46.7\% + 40\% = 86.7\%$) believe that there is more information in SPINE (5) than there is in SPINE (6). SPINE (5) is a very much loaded textbook. It almost contains all the grammatical rules, useful vocabulary and language activities that the students need and encounter in SSSC English Exams. This explains why ($37.3\% + 38.7\% = 76\%$) of the respondents believe that teachers encourage students to give

more attention to SPINE (5). (13.3% + 4% = 17.3%) do not support the notion and (6.7%) are not sure. However, only (18.7% + 20% = 38.7%) think that students give more attention to SPINE (5), while (48% + 5.3% = 53.3%) do not support the statement and (8%) do not know. At the same time, (13.3% + 26.7% = 40%) think that the students neglect SPINE (6) and (49.3%) think that the students do not neglect SPINE (6), while (10.7%) are not sure.

(10.7% + 36% = 46.7%) think that the materials in SPINE (5) are appropriately recycled in SPINE (6), while (50.6) believe the materials are not appropriately recycled. (2.7%) are not sure. (20% + 36% = 56%) think that the students can study only SPINE (6) to prepare for the SSSC English Exams. (34.7% + 8% = 42.7%) do not support and (1.3%) cannot give a fixed opinion. On the contrary, (32% + 50.7% = 80.7%) believe that careful study of SPINE (5) qualifies the student to sit for the SSSC English Exams. Teachers lay more stress on SPINE (5) than SPINE (6) because it is self-content as well as more relevant to the exam. (13.3%) disagree and (4%) do not know. So, (34.7% + 45.3% = 80%) of the respondents suggest that SPINE (5) could be taught in the third grade and SPINE (6) in the second. (14.7% + 2.7% = 17.4%) do not support the idea and (2.7%) cannot support either. What is most important is that (21.3% + 60% = 81.3%) believe that both SPINE (5) and (6) need to be re-graded.

It appears that there is some sort of deficiency in the syllabus, i.e., the gradation of the materials across the different textbooks of the SPINE series. The further the students go with their study of the language, the more knowledge and amount of exposure do we expect they should have. There is no meaning in giving

greater doses of language at lower levels while reducing the amount of language at higher stages. And, above all, why should we focus on testing what the students have learned previously more than on what they have studied at their very recent period of time at the end of which they are supposed to sit for their achievement exam? This problem should be resolved if we want our achievement test to give a reliable measurement.

4.2.5. Testing Hypothesis (5):

The SSSC English Exam attains a very low degree of usefulness.

(8% + 46.7% = 54.7%) of the respondents believe that the SSSC English Exam in its recent form is a proper achievement test, while (38.7% + 4% = 42%) think that it is not and (2.7%) are not sure. The researcher can assert that (54.7%) does not classify the SSSC English Exam as an effective quality test. It just fulfils average efficiency, while standardized achievement tests should attain over 90 per cent approval.

(6.7% + 42.7% = 49.4%) of the subjects believe that the SSSC English Exam can accurately tell us about the students' achievement, meanwhile (40%+2.7% = 42.7%) think that it cannot and (8%) are not sure about that point. This result qualifies the SSSC English Exam as less than average. Considering the discriminative feature, (8% + 53.3% = 61.3%) think that the SSSC English Exam can discriminate between the students. (28% + 2.7% = 30.7%) believe the contrary and (8%) cannot decide. This is, in fact, a little bit strange result and somewhat contradictory to what has been stated in the previous statements. There might be a

problem with the word "discriminate" itself since it is a technical term and might have caused some sort of confusion to the respondents. The SSSC English Exam has lost its discriminating feature since the students' grades are upscaled unequally.

(14.7% + 29.3% = 44%) believe that the SSSC English Exam in its present form is a valid tool of measurement, while (40% + 6.7% = 46.7%) believe it is invalid and (9.3%) cannot give a sure response. In an achievement test validity should score a very high rate.

(13.3% + 57.3% = 70.6%) think the SSSC English Exam covers the syllabus, while (22.7% + 4% = 26.7%) think it does not and (2.7%) are not sure. We can say that the SSSC English Exam attains a relatively good degree of comprehensiveness since it tests all the global skills (comprehension, summary and composition) and the subskills (grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure).

Only (5.3% + 30.7% = 36%) consider the SSSC English Exam as a reliable tool of measurement. (41.3% + 12% = 53.3%) think it is unreliable and (10.7%) cannot decide.

The researcher can assert that validity and reliability are very low in SSSC English Exams while comprehensiveness is relatively high.

According to Bachman and Palmer's approach these qualities (validity and reliability) of the test usefulness should score high because they are more important than the others which comprise impact, interactiveness, practicality and authenticity. Only (10.7% + 28% = 38.7%) believe that the SSSC English Exam in its recent form makes the experience of language learning enjoyable, while (46.7% + 8% = 54.7%) believe it does not and (6.7%) are not sure. In an interesting comment, Dr Ahmed

Guma'a Siddiek in his Ph.D thesis has pointed out that sadness and gloomy environment are two features of the SSSC English Examinations since eleven examples of sadness were presented from paper (1) of 2003 exam (PP. 112 - 113). So, SSSC English Exam shows a low degree of interactiveness because it does not consider the testee's affective schemata.

Only (5.3% + 26.7% = 32%) believe the SSSC English Exams encourage the students to learn more English, while (49.3% + 13.3% = 62.6%) do not support the point and (5.3%) remain neutral.

(6.7% + 64% = 70.7%) believe the questions of the SSSC English Exams test what the students are expected to have learned. Theoretically, this is of course true. In practice things might get different. The statement has proved to be weak and does not serve testing the hypothesis stated in this section of the questionnaire.

(25.3% + 54.7% = 80%) think the questions of the SSSC English Exams are easy to score. (1.3%) are not sure, while (16% + 2.7% = 18.7%) think they are not. That means SSSC English Exam is practical to score. However, some questions in the exam are subjective such as the composition, summary, transformational items as well as open-ended questions in the comprehension section. It is needless to mention that conducting and scoring the SSSC English Exam costs a lot of money.

(9.3% + 44% = 53.3%) believe that the interpretation we make in the light of the scores of the SSSC English Exams conform to the values and goals of the society. (26.7% + 4% = 30.7%) do not agree and (16%) are not sure. The problem is that we need to define these values and goals in a society that suffers turmoil and marginalization. This will lead us to investigate in separate studies the political,

social, economic impacts of SSSC English Exams on test-takers so that we can ensure a sense of fairness and justice.

(6.7% + 53.3% = 60%) think that the interpretations we make in the light of the scores of the SSSC English Exams conform to the values and goals of the educational system. (25.3% + 2.7% = 28%) disagree and (12%) are not sure. Again, we need to break down these values and goals into minute, well-defined concepts that can be measured tangibly. This might be the objective of a separate research, too.

(32% + 32% = 64%) of the respondents believe that the current form of the SSSC English Exam should be changed. (24% + 6.7% = 30.7%) do not support the change and (5.3%) remain neutral. Anyhow, the researcher can assert that there is some sort of dissatisfaction with the present form of the SSSC English Exam and reform is a necessity.

4.3. Discussion of the Interview Arguments

In this part the researcher will discuss some of the arguments set forth by Ustaz Al Musbah Babikir Al Fadil– the curriculum designer and the setter of SSSC English Exams.

4.3.1. The Purpose of the Current Form of the SSSC English Exam

Ustaz Al Musbah states that the present form of the SSSC English Exam was suggested and used in 2000 because, according to a foreign expert's judgment Ms Rita, the SSSC English Exams used before 2000 were

- a. too difficult and did not suit the students' language ability.
- b. irrelevant to the syllabus, i.e., the materials used in them were extracted from sources other than the SPINE books.

Therefore, the present form fulfils two objectives:

- a. To ensure an interactional relationship between the exam and the instructional programme.
- b. To avoid teachers and parents' dependence on the materials irrelevant to the recommended syllabus.

It is now obvious that the construct of the SSSC English Exam in its entirety matches the construct of the instructional programme. However, it is very important to investigate the degree of this consistency. The passages and the composition topics are all extracted from the SPINE books, but the task level in the exam is not the same as in the textbook. For instance, the students are asked in SPINE (6), (second edition, 1998: P 133) to write 3 or 4 paragraphs about a frightening or funny

experience. The task limit is decided as this ; "You should write about 300 – 400 words." The least task limit for composition writing in book (6) is 250 words (see P 13). On the other hand, the task limit in the exam is (120 –180) words only. The SPINE aspires to help the students write lengthy essays, while the exam aspires for less than half the task limit. Isn't the level or limit of the task part of the construct we want to test or the objective we want our students to achieve? In both cases teachers seem to be dissatisfied with what their students write. Thus, the test, syllabus and even the teachers should be put under questioning.

Ustaz Al Musbah believes that the students should at least be given 80 words as a guide in order to be able to write about a topic. Eighty words versus (120 – 180) task requirement seems to be too much guide. The more help we are to give our students to enable them answer the examination questions, the more obstacles we will put on their way which prevent them from revealing the best they have. Too much guidance is like too much nestling which spoils the child. We need to strike a balance to make sure all the parts – test, testees and syllabus – are doing well. The test should create a positive challenge which encourages for hard work and rewards for it.

Secondly, the syllabus is a servant which should help the students learn the language and not the opposite. Likewise, too much dependence on the student's book will limit the students' language ability. Other materials should be used to supplement the textbook. Literature has been eliminated from the syllabus for some reasons which Ustaz Al Musbah has mentioned in the interview (see the full text in the appendixes). At the same time, he mentions that he has suggested "reading skills

papers" to accompany the SPINE books but for some reasons, these papers were not included in the syllabus. If the SPINE series is not entwined with extensive reading materials, then why should it be the objective of the exam in its present form to discourage the students and parents from using materials extracted from other sources?

The SPINE is not a holy book which claims to contain everything the students need. The researcher believes that part of the materials used in the exam should be taken from sources other than the student's textbooks. Language sources should be diversified and made at hand and the students should be encouraged to enrich their knowledge and practice from whatever sources or materials they can benefit from.

4.3.2. The SSSC English Exam and the Objectives of the SPINE

According to Ustaz Al Musbah, the objectives of the SPINE series are quite realistic and clear; however, achieving them is dependent on the quality of teaching. Teaching is only one factor. There are also other factors which should be considered to make sure that these objectives are achieved. As for the syllabus, in many cases it is not fully studied. The academic year, which consists of 210 days, does not provide enough time to finish the books. Political reasons, such as strikes and unexpected holidays, also contribute to the problem and prevent the books from being completed within the academic year. However, in the researcher's view, the objectives stated in the SPINE books are too general and much more aspiring. They need to be broken down and defined more clearly so that we can measure their achievement. Look at this objective in the teacher's book of SPINE (5), "The

students should have developed **further** the four language skills." Which level is meant by "further"? Further is a vague word to be used in specifying an objective. Another objective states that "The pupils should have learned to understand and use English which is relevant to their needs and will help them to communicate in English with adequate accuracy and fluency in social, work and study situations" What can teachers understand from this word "adequate"? What level of accuracy and fluency is targeted? If the students can achieve this objective, then they can be completely perfect! such objectives should be interpreted in procedural terms in order to be understood, achieved and measured.

Ralph Tyler (1949), an American curriculum evaluator, urged that an objective should specify (i) the content to be learnt, and (ii) the processes and skills that the learners are to engage in and develop in dealing with that content (in Douglas Barnes: 1985: P 26). It is necessary to break down into details the subskills involved, so that the teacher can plan to reinforce them by systematic practice. (Douglas Barnes: P 33)

4.3.3. The SSSC English Exam and The Educational System

Mr. Al Musbah blames the whole educational system for not achieving the objectives of the SPINE Series. According to him, the students used to be filtered in the old system. But now large numbers of students move to the upper level before they subject to the filtration process. Moreover, lack of teacher training is part of the problem and that the amount of exposure to language has also regressed. To the

above the syllabus and the tool of measurement should also be added. The situation is like a vicious circle. Each factor contributes to the problem on its part.

4.3.4. The SSSC English Exam And The Students

Ustaz Al Musbah puts it explicitly that there is a general consensus among teachers that the standard of English is deteriorating and he puts it implicitly that the SSSC English Exam considers this lowering standard which, in its turn, contributes to it.

4.4. Difficulty Measures for SSSC English Exams

A text difficulty can be measured by using lexical density, lexical variety and lexical sophistication. The length of the text and the amount of information contained in it also affect the readability and level of difficulty.

4.4.1. The Significance of Passage Length in the SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007)

The word-count used by the researcher for the comprehension passages of the SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007) illustrates that the passages used in these exams are much shorter than the passages which the students are trained to read in their SPINE books. In fact, the shorter the text, the less information it has and the easier it is to read; provided that lexical density, lexical variety and lexical sophistication are of reasonable level in the text. At the same time lengthy passages with low or at least reasonable density, variety and sophistication encourage the reader to go on with the reading, develop his skills and well display his comprehension ability for assessment. A balance between the length and linguistic richness should be made to

ensure the readability and validity of the reading task for assessing the students' performance in reading comprehension. The same thing should be done with the passages to be summarized by the students.

The word count for the comprehension passages used in the SSSC English Exams 2004 , 2005 , 2006 , 2007 reveals 243, 143, 165, 123 words for each exam respectively. The diagram in (fig.(1)) depicts a decline in the length of passages used for assessing reading comprehension. 2007 reveals the least length (123 words only).

On the other hand, the word count for parallel reading comprehension texts from the SPINE books reveals 497, 228, 497 and 294 words. The parallel texts in the

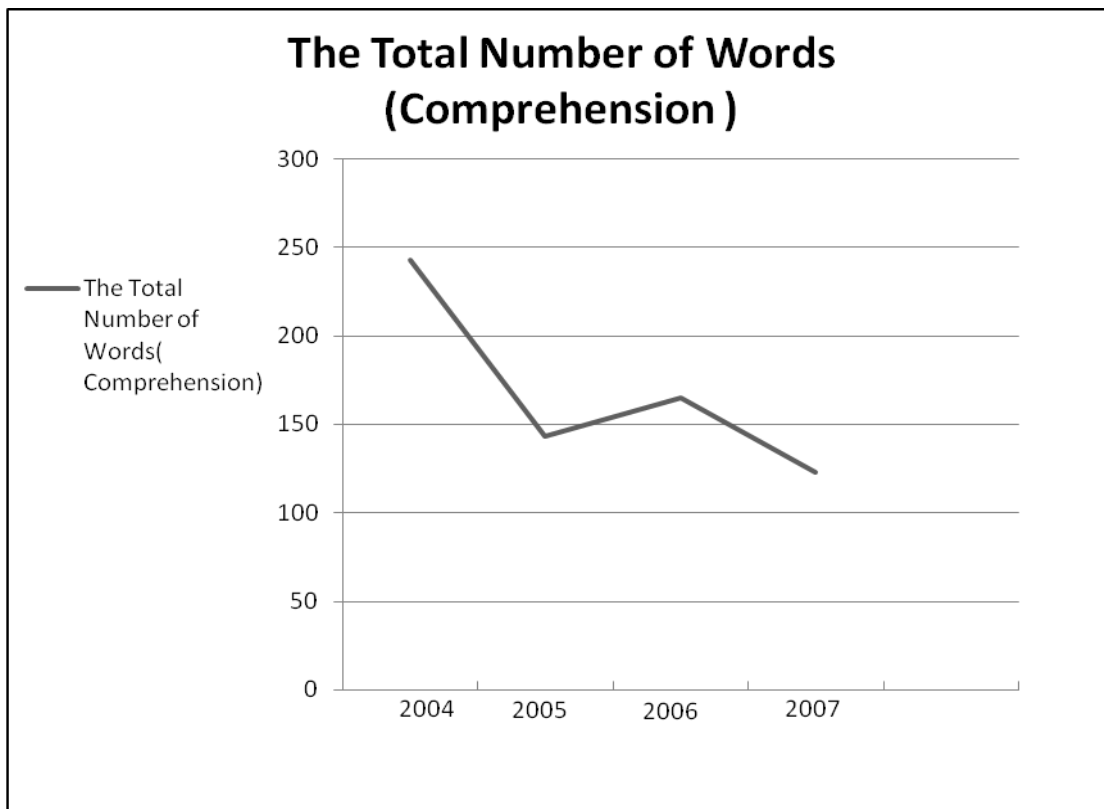


Fig.(4.1)

The diagram illustrates the fall of the total number of words in the comprehension passages of the SSSC English Exams (2004-2007).

SPINE books have been used in the examination papers, with some adaptation, to ensure— as stated by Ustaz Al Musbah in the interview— a strong relationship between the exam and the instructional programme (The SPINE books). However, the task limit does not match (see fig (2)).

As for the texts used in the summary questions, there is also an observable tendency to reduce the number of words used in the texts 166, 149, 111 and 89 words for the years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively. The graph in (fig (3)) illustrates the 3-phase steep decline.

The tendency to use short texts in the SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007) does not consist with objectives stated for the SPINE series, i.e., to stress the development of reading and writing skills.

4.4.2. Lexical Density of the Texts Used in SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007)

Lexical density as a technique can help analyze texts to measure their complexity and readability. The range of vocabulary items the students are expected to learn in the SPINE books is much greater than the set of grammatical rules they are assigned to acquire. Moreover, errors that result from the misunderstanding of vocabulary are potentially more misleading than those of grammar (Tricia: 2003: p 111). So, comprehensibility is affected by lexical density.

The lexical densities of the texts used in the comprehension passages of the 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007 English Exams indicate (48%), (52%), (49%) and (53%) for each exam respectively, while those of the parallel texts from the SPINE

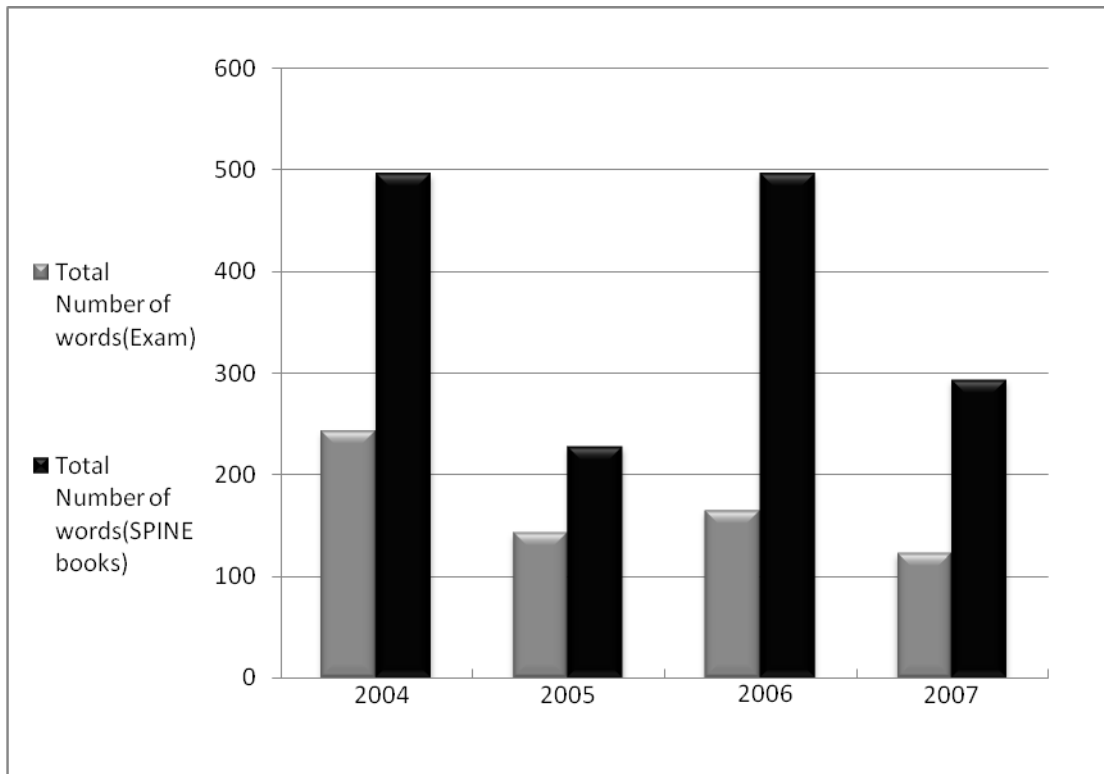


Fig. (4.2)

The graph shows the Total Number of words used in the comprehension passages of SSSC English Exams (2004-2007) compared with parallel texts from the SPINE books

The parallel Texts are:

1. Alternative Energy **SPINE (6)**.
2. Louis Pasteur **SPINE (3)** (taught in basic level grade 8th).
3. Alternative Energy **SPINE (6)** (The text is used twice in 2004 and 2006).
4. Life in a Baggara village **SPINE(5)**.

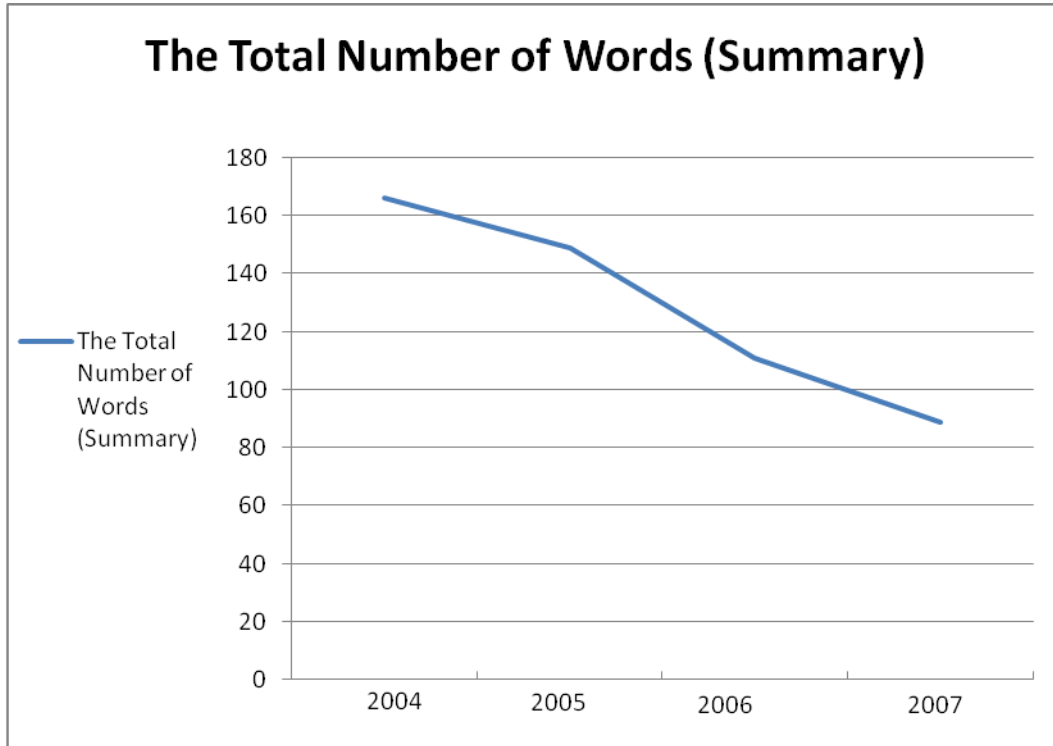


Fig.(4.3)

The diagram depicts the decline of the total number of words in the texts used for the summary questions in the SSSC English Exams (2004-2007).

books reveal (55%), (50%), (55%) and (53%). None of the parallel texts has a lexical density below (50%). (55%) as a lexical density for a parallel text from SPINE (6) significantly exceeds (48%) for a text used to measure reading comprehension in the SSSC English Exam of 2004 (see fig (4)).

As for the summary, the lexical densities – (49%), (42%), (48%) and (60%) for the years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively – indicate a level below (50%) except for 2007 which depicts an odd percentage. A text of (60%) lexical density is too demanding for the students. Ure (1971 p 443 – p 52) has found that written texts usually have lexical densities ranging from 36% to 57% (see fig (5)).

4.4.3. Lexical Variety of the Texts Used in SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007)

Lexical variety measure for comprehension passages reveals (38%), (35%), (36%) and (48%) for the years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively. The parallel texts reveal (30%), (32%), (30%) and (39%). It is obvious that the lexical varieties of the comprehension passages in the SSSC English Exams are higher than those of the parallel texts. This can be justified by the fact that vocabulary items are usually recycled throughout the passages used in the student's books for pedagogical reasons and to fully contextualize these items so that they can be learned easily. However, it is undesirable to give too much context or repeat the words many times in texts used for assessing the students' reading ability in achievement texts (see fig (6)).

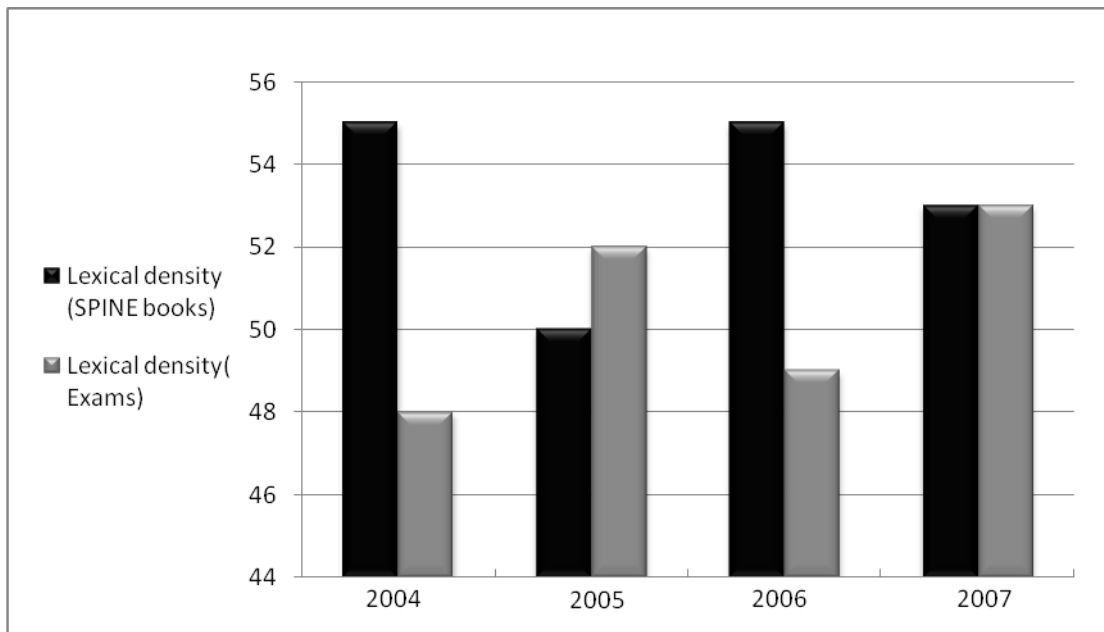


Fig. (4.4)

The graph above illustrates the Lexical Density of the comprehension passages used in SSSC English Exams (2004-2007) compared with parallel texts from the SPINE books.

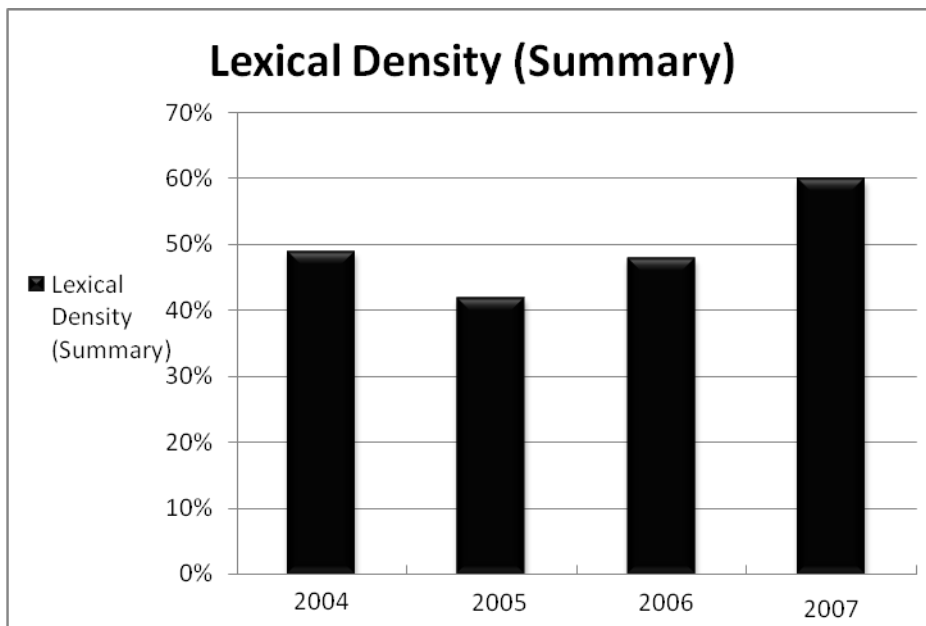


Fig.(4.5)

Hint:

In 2004 there were three separate summary questions. For simplicity lexical density has been calculated by the summation of content words over the total number of words in all the three questions.

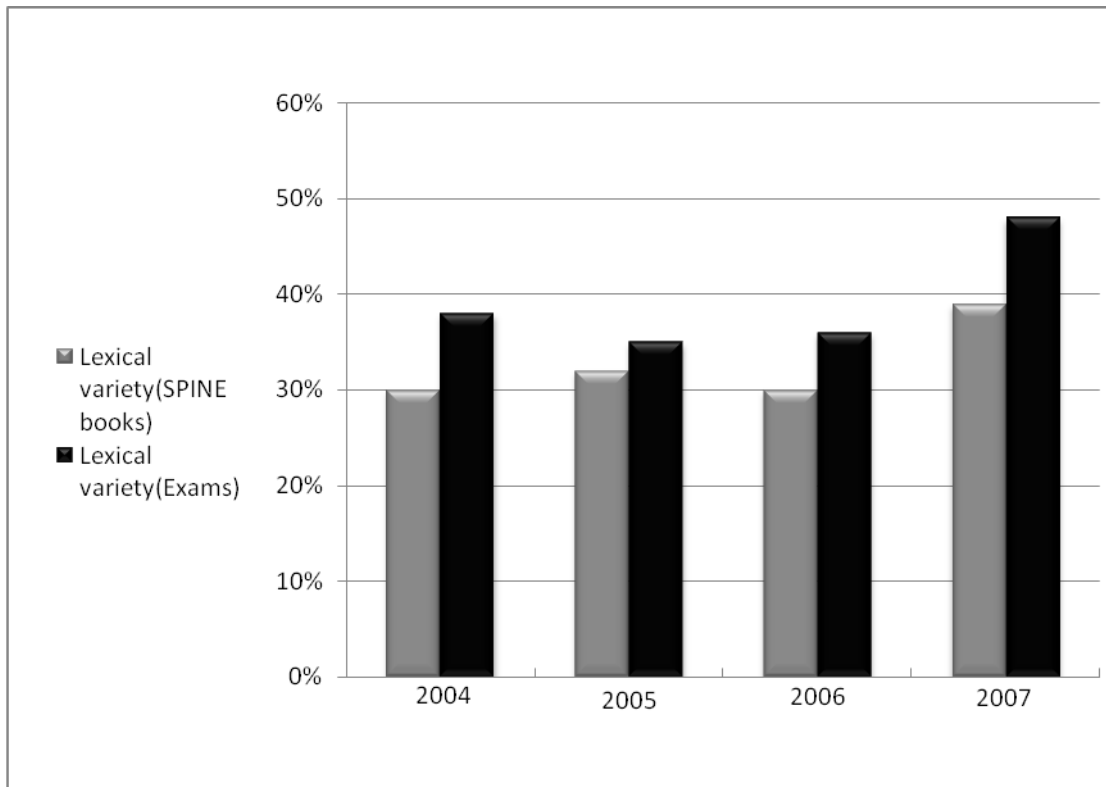


Fig. (4.6)

The graph illustrates the Lexical variety of the comprehension passages used in SSSC English Exams (2004-2007) compared with parallel texts from the SPINE books.

The summary texts used in the SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007) have (43%), (34%), (41%) and (48%) lexical varieties respectively, which are obviously greater than the parallel texts for the same reasons stated previously (see fig (7)).

4.4.4. Lexical Sophistication of the Texts Used in SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007)

As for lexical sophistication, the comprehension passages of the SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007) show these percentages (7%), (6%), (10%) and (12%) respectively. The parallel texts mark (9%), (8%), (9%) and (13%). 2005 shows the lowest lexical sophistication (6%) and 2007 the highest (12%). The highest in the parallel texts is (13%) and the lowest is (8%) (see fig (8)).

In the texts used for the summary questions, lexical sophistication is shown as follows: (14%), (7%), (8%) and (6%) for the years (2004 – 2007) respectively – the lowest being in 2007 and the highest in 2004, which means the decline is obvious (see fig (9)).

It is noticeable that there is an inverse relationship between length and lexical sophistication. The longest text, which is one of the parallel texts, has the second least lexical sophistication (9%). Lexical sophistication depends on the vocabulary the students are supposed to learn as proposed by the textbook.

4.4.5. Conclusion

The texts used for assessing the students' comprehension and summary in the SSSC English Exams should be balanced in terms of length and linguistic

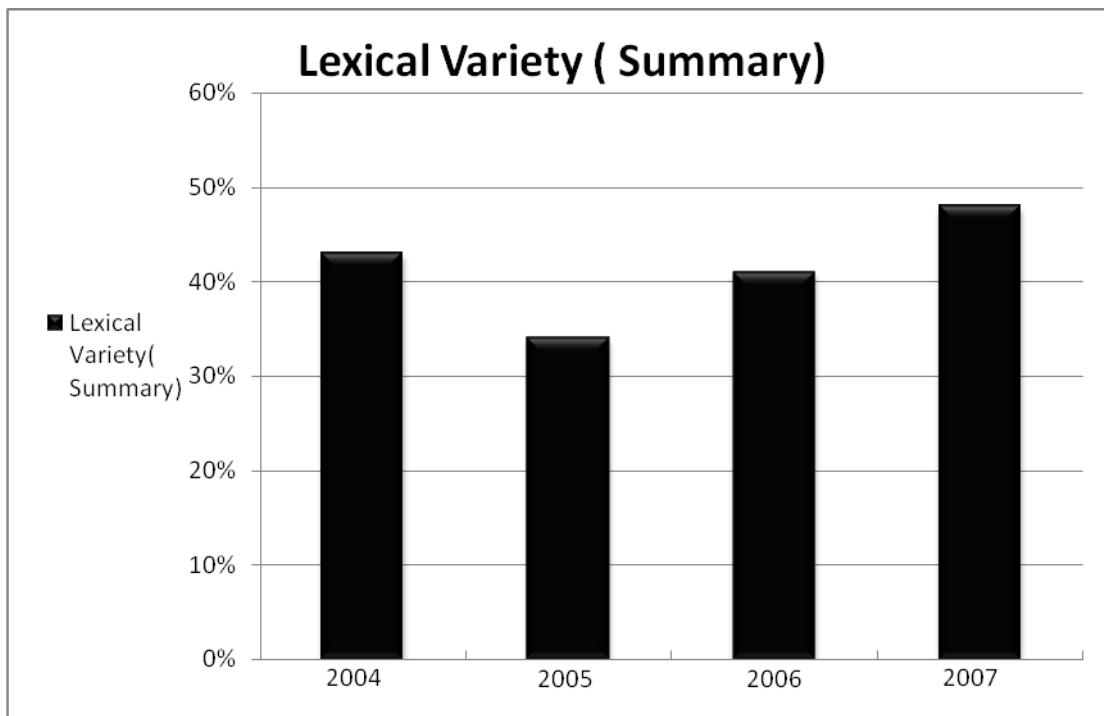


Fig.(4.7)

Hint:

Lexical variety has been calculated from the three texts as a whole for the summary question 2004.

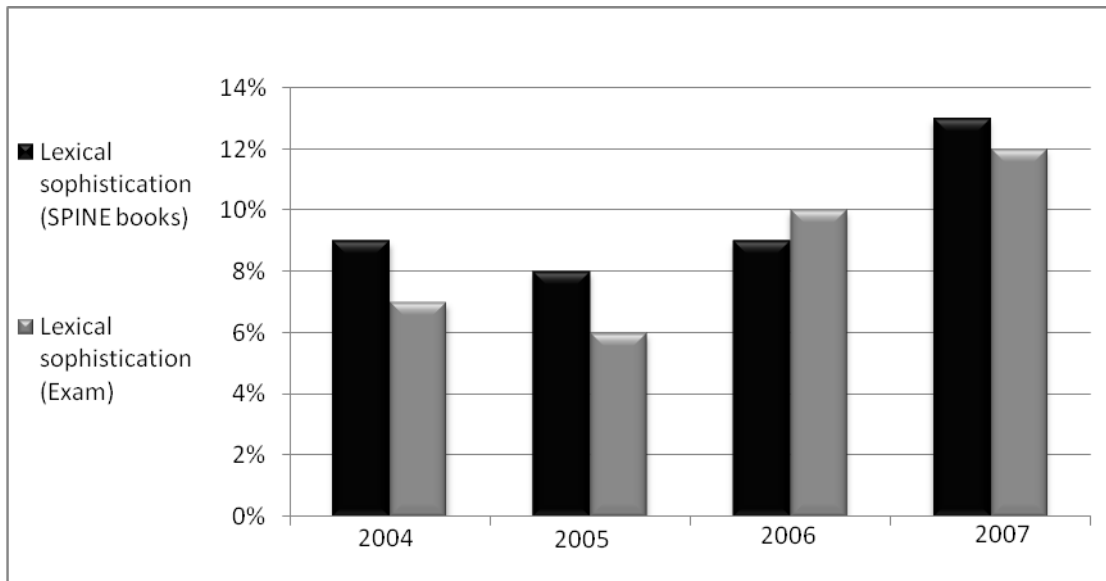


Fig. (4.8)

The graph above illustrates the Lexical Sophistication of the comprehension passages used in SSSC English Exams (2004-2007) compared with parallel texts from the SPINE books.

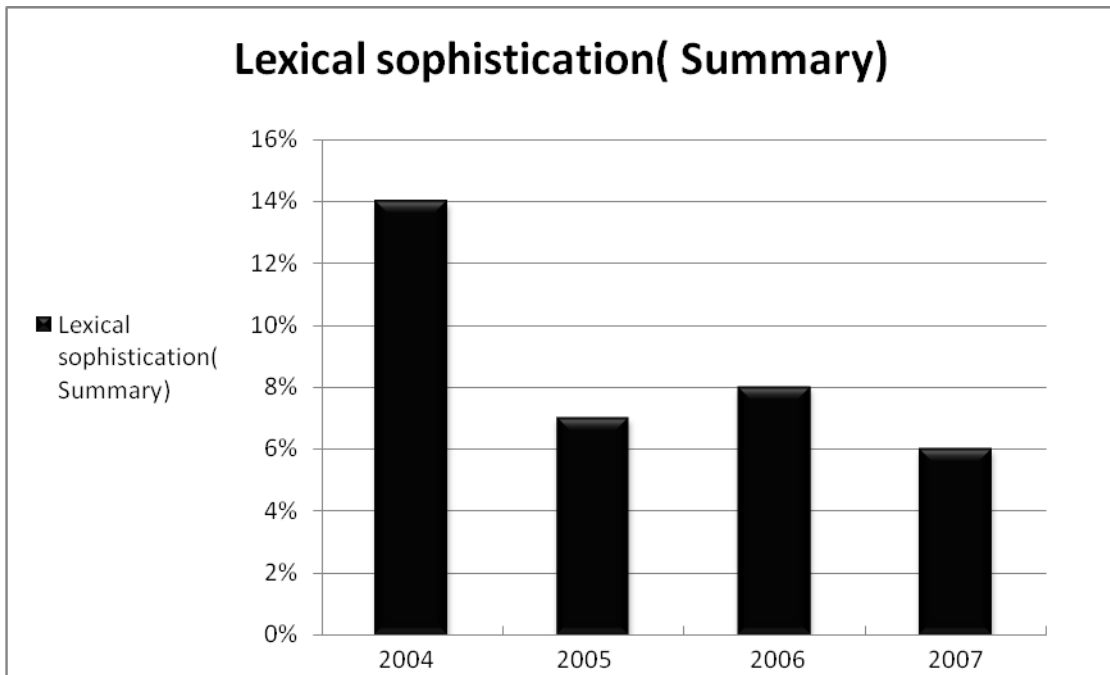


Fig.(4.9)

Hint:

Instead of separately, lexical sophistication for summary in 2004 has been calculated by the summation of the three texts.

complexity. They should, in other words, resemble the texts the students encounter in their SPINE books. Only then can we claim that the scores they attain in comprehension and summary reflect their real abilities and show whether the objectives of the SPINE books have been achieved.

CHAPTER (5)
CONCLUSION

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CONCLUSION

In this chapter the researcher will conclude the study with a list of findings as well as a group of recommendations.

5.1. Research Findings

The research has resulted in major as well as minor findings which relate to the SSSC English Exam as an achievement test, the test-takers, methodology of teaching and the syllabus.

5.1.1. Major Findings

The leading of these findings is that research hypotheses have proved to be correct.

1. The questions of the SSSC English Exams are repeated, predictable and insensitive to the students' language ability.
2. The questions of the SSSC English Exams are relevant to the SPINE books, but do not cater for the students future needs.
3. The upgrading process that occurs to the students' scores discourages both students and teachers to do at their best.
4. The questions of the SSSC English Exams are more related to SPINE (5) than they are to SPINE (6).
5. The SSSC English Exam attains a very low degree of usefulness.

5.1.2. Minor Findings

1. The task limit in the SSSC English Exam does not match that of the SPINE book.
2. The questions of the SSSC English Exams are below the expected level of difficulty.
3. One examination paper is not enough to effectively tell about the students' language ability.
4. The students' performance in the writing skill is very poor.
5. It seems the students have not adequately developed the reading skills so that they will confidently use them when they go to university.
6. The questions of the SSSC English Exams do not consider or satisfactorily test the communicative competences of the students.
7. The questions of the SSSC English Exams lack creativity and do not cater for the students' affective schemata.
8. The students can get high marks without hard work, so the exams do not positively challenge the students' abilities.
9. The students depend on the upgrading process and know that they will be given marks which they do not work for.
10. SPINE (5) is a much loaded textbook which is indispensable for the students to study carefully.
11. The materials presented in both SPINE (5) and (6) need to be re-graded and re-organized.
12. The questions of the SSSC English Exams need to be made more valid and more reliable.

13. Excellent students are affected negatively by the results of the SSSC English Exams, while weaker students get much support and can compete excellent ones.
14. The objectives of SPINE series are too general and hard to measure.
15. The SSSC English Exam indicates a general weakness in the whole educational system.

5.2. Recommendations

1. The present form of the SSSC English Exam should be reviewed and new techniques should be developed.
2. Those responsible for setting SSSC English Exam should lay more stress on communicative approach of language testing.
3. Too much dependence on the textbook can hinder better learning of the language, so test-designers should include a limited amount of supplementary materials to be included in the exams to encourage hard work and to give real indication to language ability. This can help reduce the amount of rote learning and spotting practices.
4. The square root system which is used to upgrade students' scores should be abolished.
5. The SPINE series should be reviewed and the new variants occurring in the international scene should be put into consideration. Some topics should be deleted, others introduced and the series should be re-graded.

6. The SSSC English Exam should be of two papers, because one paper is not sufficient to provide diverse questions and various language points to be tested.
7. Official workshops should be held to evaluate the SSSC English Exams. Teachers, students and interested people should participate in them. Language testing practice should be made a democratic one.
8. More researches should be encouraged and data concerning the different processes of handling the test should be made accessible and public.
9. A specialised institute for constructing, validating, reviewing, as well as carrying out researches on English language tests should be set up and empowered with wide authorities.
10. Researches on the impacts of English language tests on the society, educational system in particular and the whole social system in general should be carried out.
11. The researcher recommends that the SSSC English Exams from 2008 up to now should be studied to see whether there is any kind of improvement.
12. The researcher recommends a study to compare the testing system in the basic level with that of the secondary level to see if there are any similarities and disparities between the two systems and whether they support each other.
13. Beside assessment, SSSC English Exams should be designed in order to enhance and support language learning.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIXES

The Text of the Interview with Ustaz AL-Musbah Babikir AL-Fadil

1- Why was it necessary to change the form of the (SSSC) English Exam to the present one?

The old kind of exam has been changed to the present form of examination in 2000 and there were obvious reasons for this change:

- a. To ensure an interactional relationship between the exam and the instructional programme.
- b. To avoid teachers and parents' dependence on the materials irrelevant to the recommended syllabus.

Therefore, the content of the exam is now exactly from the SPINE series. This does not suggest that the words and structures are copied from the book as they are. The content of the materials is the same, meanwhile the form is paraphrased through rewording the meaning.

People think that I suggested this change in the form of the exam, but, in fact, I collected a battery of the old exams and sent them to Britain to a specialised institution where it was reported that those exams were too demanding and beyond the students' ability. Ms Rita mentioned that the comprehension passages which exceeded one page and a half were too difficult and one needed to be a native in order to be able to answer the summary questions. Most of the materials used in those exams were irrelevant to the student's book. As for the composition topics in

the old exams, it happened that in one of the papers the students were required to write on water. The title the students were given to write about was just a word: 'water'. There was not enough guide to help the students to write. In my view, students should at least be given 80 words so as to be able to write about any topic. These words should be given to furnish the students with sufficient information about the topic.

2- What is your general view about the students' standards of English in the secondary school?

There is a general consensus of opinion voiced by many teachers that there is a lowering standard of English.

3- Do you think the teaching of English practiced in the secondary school is up to a satisfactory level?

Definitely no, because of lack of teacher training and many other factors.

4- Can you say that the syllabus is one of those factors?

The syllabus can do no more than it can. I many times said that the syllabus alone cannot provide a basis for effective language learning. The materials in the SPINE books are designed for a 210-day academic year. Every thing is put in the light of how much time is needed for it to be taught. However, There are many factors which can prevent the completion of the book during the suggested period of time such as teachers' strikes, unexpected holidays etc.

5-But this is a national syllabus and all these things should be put into consideration?

Yes, things do not go the same way in all the states of the country.

6- Some teachers think that the questions of the exams are based on the materials of SPINE (5) while SPINE (6) is relatively neglected. Do you agree?

This is a common fallacy. The exam is mistakenly thought that it is based on the materials of SPINE (5). Even book (4), and book (3)– the one that is taught in the basic 8th form– are considered in the questions of the exams. The summary passage of 2007 is taken from SPINE (4), a diagram which has been transformed into a text. The exam does consider all the SPINE series.

7- Do you think the objectives of the SPINE series have been achieved ? Why / Why not?

The objectives are quite realistic and clear, however, achieving the objectives is dependent on the quality of teaching.

8- So you do blame teachers, don't you?

Teachers are only one factor. There are other factors to be blamed too. In other words, the whole system should be blamed.

9- What do you mean by the whole system?

I mean the educational system. The students used to be filtered in the old system. Now large numbers of students move to the upper level before they get subject to the filtration process. Moreover, lack of teacher training is part of the problem and the amount of exposure to language has also regressed.

10- Is the absence of literature one of these factors?

I don't believe in teaching literature in the old way. Teaching literature used to be a painful kind of process in which teachers used to teach by translating word for word. The literature exam was also insufficient and many university teachers

refused literature as a subject of competition for college admission. There are no libraries in our schools for our students to read. In the past, the Sudanese students used to read sixty titles. I had a notebook in which I used to follow up my students and write questions about those specific books which the students had to answer. Together with the SPINE books. I was asked to suggest literature books to be taught. As I did not believe in teaching literature the way I have explained, I suggested writing "reading skills papers". I wrote some of them and some of them were taken as extracts from different sources. However, they were not included in the syllabus. One last point I would like to raise is that the role of educational supervision should be made more effective.

11- What is the solution to the problem of the weak standard of English in the Sudan?

The solution is quite clear, but costly. We need to ensure teacher training, making student's books available etc.

12- And what about the syllabus and the exam?

The syllabus and the exam can be assessed only when the other factors are doing well.

13- Does the (SSSC) English Exam discriminate between the students? Does it measure the students' language ability?

Of course yes! It does measure the different abilities of the students: weak, average and brilliant.

14- Some teachers think that the (SSSC) English Exams are easy, predictable and insensitive to the students' language ability. What is your comment about that ?

The general standard of English is deteriorating and the exams should measure the students' ability.

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total number of words	243	143	165	123
Number of content words	116	75	81	65
Lexical density	48%	52%	49%	53%
Lexical variety	38%	35%	36%	48%
Lexical sophistication	7%	6%	10%	12%

Table(4.1) shows data about the comprehension passages of SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007)

Year	2004 Text(1)	2005 Text(2)	2006 Text(3)	2007 Text(4)
Total number of words	497	228	497	294
Number of content words	275	115	275	156
Lexical density	55%	50%	55%	53%
Lexical variety	30%	32%	30%	39%
Lexical sophistication	9%	8%	9%	13%

Table (4.2) shows data about the parallel texts of the SPINE books

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total number of words	166	149	111	89
Number of content words	82	63	53	53
Lexical density	49%	42%	48%	60%
Lexical variety	43%	34%	41%	48%
Lexical sophistication	14%	7%	8%	6%

Table (4.3) shows data about the summary texts of SSSC English Exams (2004 – 2007)

Referee Board of the Questionnaire

Name	University
1. Prof. Sadig Tamimi	Juba University Faculty of Education (English Dept.)
2. Dr. Amna Badri	Ahfad University for Women (English Dept.)
3. Dr. Ibrahim Osman Hassan	U. OF. K Faculty of Education
4. Mr. Salaheddin Abdalla Numan	Omdurman Islamic University Faculty of Education (English Dept.)