

## Critical Assessment of English Language Students Performance in Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination: A Systematic Review of West African Examination Council, 2015-2023

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### Abstract

*This study presents a systematic review of students' performance in English Language in the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) from 2015 to 2023. It critically examines trends, identifies contributing factors, and evaluates teaching strategies, curriculum delivery, and Chief Examiners' Reports. Findings indicate fluctuating performance rates, with a significant decline in 2017 (46%) and a peak in 2021 (63%), reflecting systemic challenges in Nigeria's secondary education. Key influencing factors include inadequate pedagogy, poor instructional resources, socio-economic disparities, and misalignment between curriculum objectives and WAEC assessment standards. The review highlights persistent student weaknesses in essay writing, comprehension, and grammar. Data were drawn from WAEC statistical records, examiner reports, scholarly literature, and official policy documents. Recommendations include the need for teacher professional development, curriculum reform, improved resource provision, and student-centered instructional strategies. The study concludes with policy suggestions and identifies gaps for further research to improve English Language learning outcomes in Nigerian secondary schools.*

**Keywords:** Assessment, Language Performances, SSSE Certificate, Systematic Review

### Introduction

English language proficiency is central to Nigeria's educational system, serving as a medium of instruction and a vital skill for global engagement. The WAEC English Language examination acts as a benchmark for assessing secondary school students' language competence. The ability to communicate effectively in English is not just a skill—it is a necessity in Nigeria's educational, social, and professional spaces. English remains the official language of instruction and serves as a medium for acquiring knowledge across disciplines. For senior secondary school students, mastery of English language skills—grammar, comprehension, essay writing, and summary—plays a pivotal role in determining academic success, especially in national examinations like the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Over the years, performance in this subject has increasingly become a reflection of the broader challenges facing Nigeria's secondary education system. Recent performance statistics indicate a disturbing decline in student achievement levels, raising concerns about the quality of secondary education in Nigeria (Adebayo, 2017). For instance, Okonkwo (2021) emphasized the role of teacher quality and pedagogical strategies in students' comprehension and writing proficiency, while Ibrahim and Mohammed (2023) highlighted the disconnect between classroom practices and real examination demands. These issues are compounded by broader systemic problems such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of instructional materials, and insufficient teacher training programs. Given these developments, a systematic review of WASSCE results from 2015 to 2023 is timely and necessary. It allows for a critical assessment of the trends, causes, and consequences of students' performance in English language. Moreover, it helps identify evidence-based solutions that can inform curriculum reform, teacher development, and policy interventions aimed at reversing the trend of poor achievement in English language examinations. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive, critical assessment of the trends, challenges, and implications of Nigerian students' performance in WAEC English Language exams from 2015 to 2023. It situates the analysis within broader pedagogical, socio-economic, and policy contexts.

The English Language remains a core subject in the Nigerian educational system and a compulsory requirement for admission into tertiary institutions. Despite its significance, persistent underperformance in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) has raised concerns among educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. WAEC reports from 2015 to 2023 indicate fluctuating outcomes in English Language, with pass rates ranging from 46% to 63%, reflecting inconsistent academic achievement among candidates (WAEC, 2023). This persistent irregularity suggests deeper systemic challenges such as ineffective teaching methods, lack of instructional resources, poor student attitudes, and socio-economic constraints. These factors may hinder the acquisition of language competence necessary for success in external examinations. Furthermore, most existing studies focus on isolated years or regions, lacking a comprehensive longitudinal review that captures national trends

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Critical Assessment of English Language Students Performance in ... Abubakar, S. R (2025) over time. Without a critical, systematic review of WAEC English Language performance across several years, the root causes of the underperformance remain poorly understood and inadequately addressed.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive and systematic review of students' performance in English Language as recorded in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) between 2015 and 2023. This study specifically seeks to examine the trends and patterns in students' performance in WAEC English Language examinations over the nine-year period under review. By doing so, it aims to uncover recurring patterns of achievement or decline that could point to broader systemic issues. It also intends to identify the major factors responsible for the observed inconsistencies in performance, which may include teaching methodologies, student attitudes, curriculum gaps, resource availability, and socio-economic challenges. Furthermore, the study will critically assess the extent to which existing teaching strategies and curriculum implementation practices have influenced students' outcomes in English Language. Additionally, the research will analyze WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports and statistical data to extract evidence-based insights into common areas of student weakness, such as essay writing, comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary. Finally, based on the findings from this systematic review, the study will propose practical and evidence-driven recommendations aimed at enhancing the teaching and learning of English Language in Nigerian secondary schools. These recommendations are expected to support educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers in addressing performance gaps and fostering long-term improvement in English Language proficiency among secondary school students.

### **Review of Related Literature**

English language occupies a central position in Nigeria's educational framework. As both the official language and the language of instruction from the upper primary level to tertiary institutions, it serves as the medium for learning and communication across subjects. Proficiency in English is not only vital for academic achievement but also a prerequisite for participation in civic life, access to employment opportunities, and global competitiveness (Ajayi & Salami, 2022). According to Bamgbose (2023), English plays a dual role in Nigeria: it unifies a linguistically diverse population and acts as a gatekeeper in the education system, particularly through high-stakes examinations like the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE). The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) is the regional body responsible for conducting standardized examinations in Anglophone West Africa. The English Language paper is a core subject in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE), and it is a compulsory requirement for admission into higher institutions in Nigeria. The examination assesses students' competencies in comprehension, summary, essay writing, lexis and structure, and oral English (WAEC, 2020). The WAEC English paper is structured into three parts: Paper 1 (Objective), Paper 2 (Theory), and Paper 3 (Oral), each aimed at testing different language skills (WAEC, 2023). A critical review of WAEC results between 2015 and 2023 reveals fluctuating student performance in English language. While some years showed marginal improvements, a general trend of underperformance persists. For instance, only 53% of candidates had credit passes in English in 2015, dropping to 46% in 2017, then rising to 63% in 2021, before declining slightly to 58% in 2023 (WAEC, 2023). These inconsistencies suggest underlying systemic issues affecting language acquisition and exam preparedness.

#### **WAEC English Language Performance (2015–2023)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>% of Candidates with Credit Pass (≥ C6)</b>	<b>Trend/Observation</b>
2015	53%	Initial benchmark year; over half passed.
2017	46%	Decline of 7%; lowest in the period reviewed.
2021	63%	Peak performance; sharp 17% increase from 2017.
2023	58%	5% decline from 2021; slight drop showing fluctuation.

These figures reflect fluctuating performance over the years, with no consistent upward trend, indicating the presence of systemic issues in teaching quality, curriculum delivery, and exam preparedness that continue to affect English language acquisition and students' outcomes in WASSCE (WAEC, 2023). The effectiveness of English language instruction is significantly shaped by the teacher's qualifications, teaching methods, and classroom engagement strategies. According to Okonkwo (2021), many English teachers in Nigerian public schools lack up-to-date pedagogical training, relying heavily on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction. This approach often fails to develop students' communicative competence and critical thinking. The Nigerian English language curriculum, while comprehensive, is often misaligned with examination requirements and lacks adequate implementation. Ibrahim and Mohammed (2023) observed that many schools lack textbooks, audio-visual aids, and other learning materials that support interactive and contextual learning. These resource gaps hinder meaningful engagement with the subject content. Student motivation, attitude toward English, and study habits are critical

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Critical Assessment of English Language Students Performance in ... Abubakar, S. R (2025) determinants of performance. Eze and Okafor (2022) reported that students who view English as a difficult or “foreign” subject are less likely to develop interest or put in sustained effort. Poor reading culture and exam fear further diminish performance outcomes. Poverty, poor school infrastructure, and lack of parental support significantly affect language learning. Students from rural or low-income backgrounds often attend overcrowded classrooms with minimal resources, limiting their access to quality instruction (Ajayi & Salami, 2022). Additionally, the home environment, especially in multilingual households, can either reinforce or hinder English language development.

### Empirical Studies

Empirical research continues to shed light on the performance of students in English language examinations. Akinyemi and Usman (2021) found a strong correlation between instructional methods and student performance, suggesting that student-centered approaches yield better results. Similarly, Adediran (2022) reported that schools with active reading programs and functional libraries had higher WAEC English pass rates. These studies underscore the importance of environment, resources, and method in determining examination success. Few studies adopt a longitudinal or systematic review approach that covers extended periods such as 2015–2023. Most analyses are localized and fail to provide a national or regional overview of performance trends. Moreover, many works underplay the role of systemic policy and curriculum reforms in shaping English language outcomes (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2023). There is also a need for studies that integrate both quantitative WAEC data and qualitative insights from stakeholders such as teachers, students, and examiners.

### Methodology

This study employed a systematic review design, which is a structured, transparent, and replicable method of synthesizing existing research and data to answer specific research questions. Unlike narrative reviews, the systematic review approach is guided by explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria and follows a rigorous protocol to minimize bias. This method is particularly suitable for this study, which seeks to critically assess patterns and determinants of students’ performance in WAEC English Language examinations over a nine-year period (2015–2023). The approach allows for an objective appraisal of quantitative performance data, as well as qualitative insights from Chief Examiners’ Reports, peer-reviewed articles, and relevant educational documents. It ensures comprehensive coverage of all relevant data sources while maintaining methodological rigor.

#### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Type	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<b>Time Frame</b>	WAEC English Language performance data from 2015 to 2023	Articles or reports published before 2015 or after 2023
<b>Content Focus</b>	Studies focused on English Language performance in WAEC or Nigerian context	Studies not related to English Language or WAEC examinations
<b>Document Type</b>	WAEC Chief Examiners’ Reports (2015–2023) Peer-reviewed journal articles Government or institutional reports	Opinion pieces, blogs, media reports without empirical basis
<b>Language Accessibility</b>	Sources published in English Documents accessible in full text	Sources not published in English Documents inaccessible or unavailable in full text

To guarantee the credibility and relevance of this systematic review, a set of clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria was established. The inclusion criteria consisted of WAEC English Language performance data spanning from 2015 to 2023, along with WAEC Chief Examiners’ Reports from the same period. Additionally, the study included peer-reviewed journal articles and empirical research specifically addressing English Language performance in Nigeria. Official documents and reports from governmental or educational institutions that dealt with secondary education and English Language assessment were also considered, provided that all materials were published in English. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria ruled out any studies or reports that did not focus directly on English Language or WAEC examinations. Materials published outside the 2015–2023 timeframe were excluded, as were informal sources such as opinion pieces, blogs, and media articles that lacked empirical foundation.

The study relied on both primary and secondary data sources to ensure a comprehensive review:

- i. WAEC Annual Reports (2015–2023): These include statistical records of student performance in English Language, disaggregated by year.
- ii. WAEC Chief Examiners’ Reports: These provide qualitative insights into common student errors, strengths, and weaknesses across examination components (essay, comprehension, grammar, oral English).

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- iii. Scholarly Articles: Peer-reviewed journals published between 2015 and 2023 covering studies on English Language performance in Nigerian secondary schools.
- iv. Government and Institutional Reports: Official policy documents, education sector reviews, and curriculum evaluation reports from agencies such as the Federal Ministry of Education, NERDC, and UNESCO.

### Data Collection and Extraction Procedure

The data collection process was systematic and followed a multi-step protocol:

- i. Identification: Relevant documents were identified using keyword searches such as "WAEC English performance", "Nigerian secondary education", "Chief Examiners' Reports", and "English language results 2015–2023".
- ii. Screening: Documents were screened based on titles and abstracts to assess their relevance. Irrelevant or duplicate materials were removed.
- iii. Eligibility Check: Full texts were assessed against the inclusion/exclusion criteria.
- iv. Data Extraction: Key information from eligible documents was extracted using a coding sheet, including year, performance statistics, thematic findings from reports, and author conclusions.
- v. Categorization: Extracted data were grouped into thematic categories: performance trends, influencing factors (e.g., pedagogy, resources, student attitude), and recommendations.

### Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed a qualitative analysis based on Content Analysis and Comparative Analysis. Based on Content Analysis WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns in student errors, areas of strength and weakness, and examiner recommendations. Comparative Analysis: Year-by-year comparisons were conducted to highlight performance gaps, improvements, and periods of decline. These analytical techniques allowed for a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics influencing English Language performance in Nigerian senior secondary schools.

### Presentation of Results

Research Focus	Language Performance	Year	Results	Findings
Examine the trends and patterns in WAEC English Language performance	Fluctuating pass rates in English (Credit level and above)	2015–2023	53% (2015), 46% (2017), 63% (2021), 58% (2023)	No consistent upward trend; performance varied due to systemic instability, with peak in 2021 and lowest in 2017 (WAEC, 2023).
Identify major factors affecting performance	Declining student proficiency in grammar, essay, and comprehension	All years (2015–2023)	Performance affected by contextual variables	Major factors include poor teaching quality, inadequate materials, lack of motivation, socio-economic constraints, and curriculum misalignment (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2023).
Assess teaching strategies and curriculum delivery	Exam-centered, teacher-dominated instruction	Across all years	Limited effectiveness	Traditional methods dominated classrooms; curriculum often not aligned with WAEC objectives or communicative competence (Okonkwo, 2021).
Analyze WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports and performance data	Repeated weaknesses in comprehension, summary, grammar	2015–2023	Recurring patterns of failure in language components	Students struggle with understanding questions, essay organization, vocabulary, expression, and grammatical accuracy (WAEC Reports, 2015–2023).

Offer recommendations for improving teaching and learning	Improve proficiency through innovation and support	Post-2023 focus	Recommendations developed based on findings	Suggested reforms include teacher training, curriculum review, better access to reading materials, ICT integration, and promotion of reading culture in schools.
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The above table reveals significant fluctuations in students’ achievement, with pass rates ranging from 46% to 63%. This inconsistency highlights systemic challenges such as poor teaching quality, inadequate resources, and socio-economic disparities affecting student outcomes. Teaching practices across the years remained largely teacher-centered and exam-driven, which limited the development of communicative competence. WAEC Chief Examiners’ Reports consistently identified recurring weaknesses in essay writing, comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary usage, indicating a gap between curriculum expectations and actual student abilities. The findings suggest a misalignment between instructional delivery and examination standards.

### Discussions of the major Findings

A longitudinal synthesis of WAEC statistics (2015-2023) confirms a jagged performance curve: credit passes fell from 53 percent in 2015 to 46 percent in 2017, climbed to 63 percent in 2021, then slid to 58 percent in 2023 (WAEC, 2023). Okonkwo (2021) and Ajayi and Salami (2022) read this turbulence as evidence of structural fragility in the school system, while Ibrahim and Mohammed (2023) emphasize year-specific shocks such as COVID-19–related closures. Despite different emphases, all three agree that the ascent recorded in 2021 is an outlier rather than a sustained trend. Regarding causal factors, scholars converge on teacher quality and resource scarcity but differ on their relative weight. Okonkwo (2021) attributes fluctuating outcomes primarily to “pedagogical inertia,” arguing that exam-centred chalk-and-talk methods suppress communicative competence. Ajayi and Salami (2022) concur yet foreground infrastructural deficits—textbook shortages, overcrowded classrooms—as equal culprits. By contrast, Bamgbose (2023) stresses macro-level language-in-education policy mismatches, noting that multilingual pupils often encounter English only in formal settings, thereby limiting practice time. The authors collectively highlight socio-economic inequity, but Eze and Okafor (2022) uniquely connect rural poverty to higher absenteeism, suggesting that contextual constraints amplify pedagogical weaknesses. On teaching strategies, consensus centres on the inadequacy of traditional lecture styles. Nonetheless, empirical findings diverge on the impact of innovative practices. Akinyemi and Usman (2021) report an 8–12 percentage-point boost in schools employing debate clubs and formative assessment, whereas Adediran (2022) finds that library access alone, without explicit strategy shifts, yields modest gains. The contrast indicates that structural resources must be paired with pedagogy that actively cultivates reading and writing skills. Analysis of WAEC Chief Examiners’ Reports reveals consistent weaknesses in essay organization, vocabulary range, and grammatical accuracy (WAEC, 2015-2023). Ibrahim and Mohammed (2023) interpret these patterns as symptoms of insufficient formative feedback, whereas Okonkwo (2021) links them to misalignment between curriculum objectives and examination demands. Ajayi and Salami (2022) add that minimal exposure to extensive reading hampers lexical development, reinforcing examiners’ observations. Drawing from these converging and diverging perspectives, the review proposes a multi-tiered reform agenda. First, all authors concur on the need for systematic in-service teacher development; however, Okonkwo (2021) argues for workshops on communicative language teaching, while Akinyemi and Usman (2021) advocate peer-mentoring models. Second, curriculum realignment should balance grammar drills with authentic language tasks, a recommendation echoed by both WAEC reports and Bamgbose (2023). Third, resource provision must prioritize functional libraries and digital platforms; yet as Adediran (2022) cautions, infrastructure must be integrated into pedagogy to be effective. Finally, targeted interventions for rural and low-income schools—such as mobile reading clinics—address the equity concerns raised by Eze and Okafor (2022). Therefore, authors differ in the emphasis they place on pedagogy, resources, or policy, their findings collectively stress that sustainable improvement in WAEC English performance demands a holistic strategy marrying teacher competence, curriculum relevance, and equitable resource distribution.

### Conclusion

WAEC performance data for 2015–2023 reveal a distinctly cyclical pattern rather than a linear progression. Credit-level passes fell from 53 percent in 2015 to a low of 46 percent in 2017, climbed sharply to 63 percent in 2021, and slipped again to 58 percent by 2023 (WAEC, 2023). This volatility signals that improvements are episodic, not systemic. Chief Examiners’ Reports across the nine years trace the same fault lines: disjointed essay structures, limited lexical repertoire, and recurrent grammatical errors continue to hamper candidates’ scripts. The persistence of these weaknesses suggests deeply rooted instructional and structural problems. A synthesis of empirical studies helps explain the pattern. Okonkwo (2021) attributes the oscillations to a predominantly teacher-centred pedagogy that privileges rote learning over communicative competence. Ajayi

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Critical Assessment of English Language Students Performance in ... Abubakar, S. R (2025) and Salami (2022) broaden the lens, linking underperformance to chronic shortages of textbooks, libraries, and digital resources—conditions that narrow students’ opportunities for meaningful language practice. Meanwhile, Ibrahim and Mohammed (2023) emphasize socio-economic disparities: overcrowded rural classrooms, irregular attendance, and limited parental support compound pedagogical deficits, making consistent gains difficult to sustain. Together, these authors also highlight a policy misalignment between the national English curriculum and WAEC’s assessment objectives. The curriculum frequently prioritizes decontextualized grammar drills, whereas the examination demands coherent argumentation and contextual vocabulary use.

### **Implications for Stakeholders**

- i. Teachers must shift from rote instruction to communicative, learner-centred methods and engage in continuous professional development to close observed skill gaps.
- ii. Students need richer exposure to extensive reading, collaborative tasks and formative feedback to build higher-order language abilities.
- iii. Policy makers should align national curricula with WAEC’s cognitive demands, ensure equitable distribution of learning resources and institutionalize regular monitoring of instructional quality.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

- i. Structured CPD programmes on communicative language teaching and formative assessment for all English teachers (Okonkwo, 2021).
- ii. Curriculum realignment to embed authentic reading-and-writing tasks that mirror WAEC question formats.
- iii. Resource enhancement, prioritizing school libraries, digital reading platforms and interactive language software, especially in rural schools (Ajayi & Salami, 2022).
- iv. School-based reading initiatives—debate clubs, reading clinics, writing workshops—to cultivate a sustained reading culture.
- v. Data-driven feedback loops using WAEC item-analysis reports so teachers can target recurring weaknesses in grammar, vocabulary and essay structure.

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