
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

English Language Performance at WASSCE: Challenges and Implications for Language Education in Sierra Leone

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| ABSTRACT

Persistent underperformance in English Language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is a cause for concern among many education stakeholders in Sierra Leone. This study examined the factors that affect the performance of students in English Language at WASSCE between 2019 and 2023. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to identify and analyse factors that influence examination outcomes, using responses from questionnaires and interviews with past students. Findings revealed widespread weaknesses in the ability to interpret, organize, and express ideas specifically with reading comprehension, writing, and listening skills. Factors contributing to poor outcomes include inadequate student preparation, limited exposure to English as a language of daily communication, insufficient instructional materials and family background. It recommends that core language skills—reading, writing, listening, and summarizing—can be strengthened through daily or regular practice in and out of school and an upgrade of teaching resources to enhance learners' English proficiency and WASSCE results.

| KEYWORDS

English Language; Performance; WASSCE; Sierra Leone; English Teaching and Learning

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 30 August 2026

PUBLISHED: 13 September 2026

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2026.8.9.13

1. Introduction

The widespread use of English Language across various fields such as business, education, science, technology and entertainment, along with its role in international communication, has established it as the global lingua franca (Shrishthy, 2022). English language plays a crucial role to weave the world into a single thread (Ahmad, 2016). English has become an acknowledged passport to better education and employment opportunities (Coleman, 2010).

In Sierra Leone, English plays a distinctive role, one that is common with other former British West African colonies where English is used for educational, official and administrative purposes against a background of indigenous languages (Bangura, 2015). Yet, in spite of the dominant role the English Language plays in the educational system of Sierra Leone, the performance of learners in schools is dropping considerably. This cuts across the entire spectrum of the educational system (Tamba, 2017).

Public examinations like the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), came into existence to serve a purpose. Adedoyin, (2013) wrote that in any educational system, especially in Africa, public examinations are seen as a requirement and are normally designed to provide a basis for decisions about the performance of individual students. They act as gatekeepers guarding entry to schools; they aid in the selection of students during the course of their careers and provide a platform for evaluation of students when leaving school. All these have implications for achievement in school and chances in life.

The objective of examining English language at WASSCE is not only to test the basic skills in communicating in English using the mediums of speech and writing but also to test the receptive and productive abilities of candidates. These abilities are expected to be demonstrated in reading comprehension, summary, vocabulary, lexis and structure, listening comprehension and the recognition of different aspects of spoken English. In the examination, candidates are expected to use English correctly, write about incidents in English that are appropriate to specific audiences and situations, organize material in paragraphs that are chronologically, spatially and logically coherent, exhibit variety in the use of sentence patterns, comply with the use of grammar, pick out and summarize relevant information from a given passage and recognize implied meaning, tones and attitudes.

In Sierra Leone and other countries in the sub region, namely Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia and Liberia, entrance to Higher Education is determined by the performance of students in senior secondary or high school and/or the scores obtained in external examinations. These "external" examinations (sometimes called "public" or "national") occupy a central role in the assessment of individual students (Kellaghan & Madaus, 2003). The WASSCE is one such public examination in operation in English-speaking West Africa. After spending three years in senior secondary school (SSS), students are expected to take the WASSCE and a credit (C4 -C6) or better in 5 subjects, including English Language or Mathematics would guarantee a candidate a place in the university.

English proficiency in Sierra Leone is thus essential for personal development as it offers individuals greater opportunities for success in various professional fields, enhances employability and career advancement and by extension promotes national development.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Despite English Language being the official medium of instruction and a core subject in schools, students' performance in English Language at WASSCE in Sierra Leone has remained consistently poor in recent years. Recent statistics reveal that very few candidates have at least a credit (A1 – C6) in English Language –

- 4% in 2019
- 8% in 2020
- 18% in 2021
- 20% in 2022
- 14% in 2023

Alternately, a high percentage of candidates have a mere pass or they fail, scoring between D7 and F9 -

- 93% in 2019
- 84% in 2020
- 75% in 2021
- 69% in 2022
- 68% in 2023

(WAEC, 2023)

Given these recent statistics on the performance of students in English Language at WASSCE, the implications for personal and national development are dire. This persistent underperformance raises concerns about the quality of teaching, availability of learning resources and students' language competence. However, there is limited empirical analysis of underlying factors influencing this performance. Hence, an in-depth analysis of the specific determinants that affect students' performance in English Language at WASSCE in Sierra Leone is crucial to identify gaps and propose actionable solutions.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the students' attitude towards English language.
2. To identify the challenges students encounter while learning English Language.
3. To examine the home-based factors that may affect examination outcomes.
4. To identify the challenges students encounter with the English Language examination at WASSCE.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What perception do students have of English Language as a subject?
2. What are the challenges of learning English Language as a subject?
3. How does the home affect examination outcomes?
4. What are the major challenges with the English Language examination at WASSCE?

1.4 Significance of the study

The study aims to generate evidence-based insights that can guide educators [teachers of English Language, Heads of schools] and curriculum planners and policymakers [Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE)] in designing targeted interventions to improve language instruction and learning outcomes. It is hoped that the students also, as they undertake the

learning of English language and prepare for the WASSCE, get a deeper understanding of the variables discussed in this study that may affect their success and endeavour to be more diligent. Additionally, the study will contribute to fill in the gaps in existing literature on English Language education senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone, offering a reference point for future research and educational reforms.

2. Review of Literature

English in anglophone West Africa is spoken in a highly multilingual environment and it often enjoys the significant status of an official or national language, serving as the language of government, law, business and commerce, education and the media (Gut, 2012). English is considered a global language, seen as the gateway to an enhanced quality of life and embraced as a medium of instruction (EMI) in multilingual West Africa (Molton and Kedzierski, 2024). In such settings, English plays certain key roles: it is the language of instruction in schools and colleges; proficiency in English ensures economic and social mobility and English provides access to global knowledge - the international forum of research, technology and communication. However, many students in West Africa experience challenges in being proficient in English as they are often mandated to learn it as a second or third language. This can be a significant barrier to comprehension and academic success.

2.1 Challenges faced in the teaching and learning of English language

Makhathini & Mncwango, (2020) suggest that 'the language of education is arguably a very powerful obstacle to the educational achievement of bilingual learners in their quest to learn through the medium of English in a bilingual classroom' (p. 71). According to their findings, teachers highlighted learner motivation, reading and writing problems, teaching style and method, lack of resources to teach and assess language and the use of English as the language of teaching and learning among others as challenges they experience during teaching and learning in English classes.

According to Nnyigide and Anyaegbu (2020), some students of English in a second language (ESL) situation encounter problems because they study it against the background of their mother tongue, in which they have attained a reasonable degree of competence; and some teachers contribute to the problem owing to their pedagogical incompetence, lack of instructional materials and language interference, among others.

According to Nor, et al (2015) many ESL learners recognize the importance of English proficiency but still struggle with writing, speaking, reading, and listening. Students also exhibit lack of confidence in speaking due to limited vocabulary and difficulty expressing and supporting ideas (Aziz and Kashinathan, 2021). In reading, they often miss main ideas and word meanings, while in listening, speaker intonation poses challenges. Additionally, learners commonly make grammatical errors in areas like subject-verb agreement, tenses, pronouns, articles, and sentence structure (Fareed et al, 2016).

Moses and Mohamed, (2019) submit that teaching writing has become difficult because of the challenges faced by the students in learning writing skills. Some challenges include: lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, poor spelling, students' readiness and lack of exposure to books and reading materials. He adds that teachers find motivating their students at diverse learning levels, unavailability of materials and time as factors affecting effective teaching and learning of English Language in the ESL classroom.

2.2 Poor performance in public examinations

The poor performance of students in public examinations is one of the most challenging problems that students as well as teachers face. This problem has many causes with educational, social, cultural and psychological dimensions (Kapur, 2018). This notwithstanding, almost 90 percent of countries worldwide use high stakes exams at the end of secondary school to award credentials and filter students into universities (Furuta 2021; Bashir et al. 2018, as cited in Rossiter et al, 2023). Yesuvadiyal, (2019) discoursed that Public Examination is a big challenge faced by students as it is often difficult to predict the outcome of an examination.

Al-Zoubi and Younes, (2015) attributed the causes of poor performance in examinations to the following: anxiety disorder and exam phobia; lack of abilities; fear of failure; lack of self-confidence; lack of a clear plan for success; pressure from parents to get the required mark; unstable family situations; tension and confusion; lack of concentration during the exam; teacher absenteeism and lateness resulting in incompleteness of the syllabus and which would also affect student's motivation, enthusiasm, zeal and commitment to learn.

Although Jerrim, (2022) agrees that anxiety about testing and schoolwork may impact the grades that young people achieve in high-stakes examinations, he maintains that this effect could either be positive or negative. For some, anxiety about an upcoming examination could lead to increased levels of motivation, focus, effort and subsequently higher grades (Kader, 2016, as cited in Jerrim, 2022), yet for others the effects could be debilitating.

In summary, the challenges faced in the teaching and learning of English in ESL contexts reveal a complex interplay of linguistic, pedagogical, psychological and systemic factors. Learners struggle not only with language structures and limited exposure but also with confidence, motivation, and socio-educational barriers, while teachers grapple with inadequate resources and instructional constraints. These difficulties ultimately manifest in students' performance in high-stakes public examinations, where anxiety and insufficient preparation further compound poor outcomes. However, many authors agree that standardized tests play a critical role in deciding whether students graduate, what college they will attend and what career paths will be open to them. It is only through much comprehensive efforts that English language education can effectively equip learners for academic success and future opportunities.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The continued poor performance of students in English Language at WASSCE has become a troublesome phenomenon and requires some theoretical foundation to explain its existence and persistence. This study uses two underpinning theories: Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory [Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1934)] and Elger's Theory of Academic Performance [Don Elger (2007)].

Vygotsky believed that human development relies on social interaction; parents, caregivers, peers and the culture are responsible for developing the child's brain. The theory suggests that human learning is largely a social process, and that our cognitive functions are formed based on our interactions with those around us who are "more skilled." (Cherry, 2022). According to the sociocultural perspective, the child's psychological growth is guided, in part, by people in their lives who are in mentor-type roles, such as teachers and parents (Scaffolding and reciprocal teaching). At other times, the child develops values and beliefs through interactions within social groups or by participating in cultural events (collaborative and cooperative learning) (Macleod, 2024).

In terms of language learning, the socio-cultural theorist Vygotsky believes that language comes out from cultural and social activity and only later becomes reconstructed as an individual, psychological phenomenon (Ozfidan et al, 2014; p. 185). This means that the psycholinguistic and learning processes are inseparable from social contexts. In other words, social contexts might influence or constrain the performance of learning a second language.

The relevance of this theory to the present study are the socio-cultural contexts namely the social practices of the schools, such as teacher efficiency and professionalism, availability of teaching and learning resources, the use of English language in the classroom, and the socio-economic status of the students' parents.

Don Elger's Theory of Performance (ToP) (2007) views performance as a journey, with "level of performance" describing an individual's location in that journey. The theory provides a framework for understanding and improving performance, viewing it as a journey involving six core components that can be used to define and analyze performance: Identity, Learning Skills, Level of Knowledge, Context (of Performance), and Personal Factors and Fixed Factors.

Apple and Ellis (2015), building on Elger's theory, argue that learning is a skill and a performance that can be intentionally improved. They outline 13 interconnected components across five areas—identity, knowledge, learning skills, context, and personal factors—that strengthen learning-to-learn performance. These include developing learner confidence and responsibility, deepening awareness of learning processes, applying appropriate strategies to different types of knowledge, enhancing cognitive, social, and emotional skills, engaging in high-quality and collaborative learning experiences, and transforming personal challenges into growth opportunities. Overall, they emphasize that students perform better when they recognize learning as a deliberate process that prepares them for future performance.

In Sierra Leone, applying these learning theories of social interaction, collaboration, scaffolding and positive modelling (Vygotsky's theory) can enhance students' engagement, skills and self-efficacy (Elger's theory). Educators can boost motivation by giving constructive feedback, setting achievable goals and showcasing role models. These approaches can improve English learning and WASSCE performance. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, staffing shortages and weak educational foundations hinder the creation of supportive learning environments and students' confidence in their abilities.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

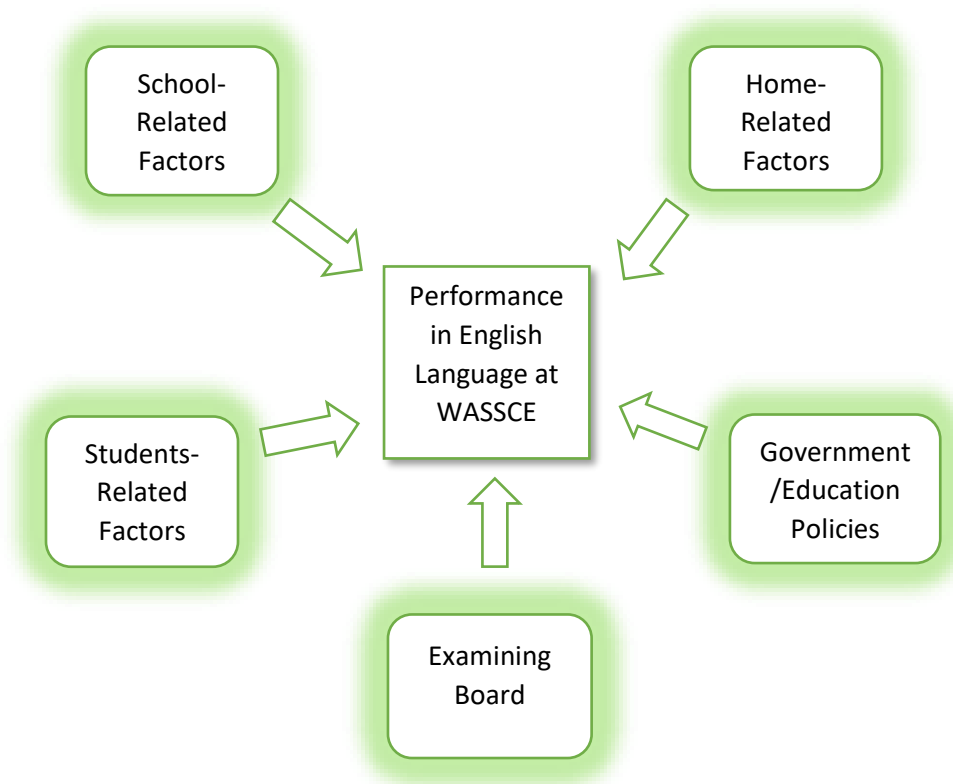


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes a framework consisting of both independent and dependent variables. The independent variables can be broadly grouped as: school-related factors, student-related factors, home-related factors, government/education policy factors and factors that pertain to the examination body, in this case, the West African Examination Council (WAEC). The dependent variable is Performance in English Language at WASSCE. The independent variables influence the dependent variable where the independent variables could either lead to a good or poor performance in English Language.

For the past decade in Sierra Leone, there have been outcries about the persistent poor performance of candidates in English Language at WASSCE. It is a much-discussed topic among education stakeholders, on the media, and in social fora. As Lavalie (2021) puts it, this has caused alarm in all sectors in the society. Not only is this continued poor performance considered a wastage on investment in secondary education, and puts a question mark on the quality of secondary education in the country (Ajayi, 2012) but it is also discouraging as the nation's future leaders cannot attain higher education, a bedrock upon which the development of the nation depends (Alade, Kuku and Osaba, 2017). Amankwah (2020) noted that many factors can influence the performance of candidates in examinations and Alufohai (2016) specifically describes school -based factors as affecting senior secondary school students' achievement in English Language.

3. Methodology

Both a qualitative and quantitative descriptive research design was employed in this study. Data was collected mainly through questionnaires issued to past students of WASSCE, in the rural and urban districts of Freetown. Interviews were also conducted with some past students. The snowball sampling method was used to select past students (those that sat the WASSCE, from 2019-2023). The objective of the study was explained, consent was sought, anonymity assured and gratitude expressed through a covering letter along with the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A examined the personal details of past students. Section B dealt with the factors affecting the student's performance at WASSCE. It had three subsections – i) student- based factors, ii) school-based factors and iii) home-based factors. Section C dealt with the students' attitude towards English Language as a subject.

Prior to the commencement of data collection, questionnaires were developed, validated and a pre-test was conducted to test the reliability of the research instrument. After the data collection, clean up, coding and removal of errors and inconsistencies was undertaken.

Quantitative data was analyzed through the use of Excel and Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Excel, for downloading, cleaning, exploration, manipulation, and analysis of data. SPSS version 22.0 was used to analyze data in the form of descriptive processes. The use of simple frequencies and percentages were produced as a result of the analyzed data and the results are presented in tables and charts.

4. Results/Findings

The target population for this study was past WASSCE students who wrote the English Language examination between 2019 and 2023. To ensure a representative sample, the respondents were selected from the Western Urban and Rural Districts of Sierra Leone. This district houses the greatest number of schools and by extension a greater percentage of candidates who attempt the WASSCE (North – 126; East – 148; South – 100; North West – 129 and West – 321). A total of 239 questionnaire were distributed but 145 (60%) were analyzed. The results of the study are presented in accordance with the objectives of the study.

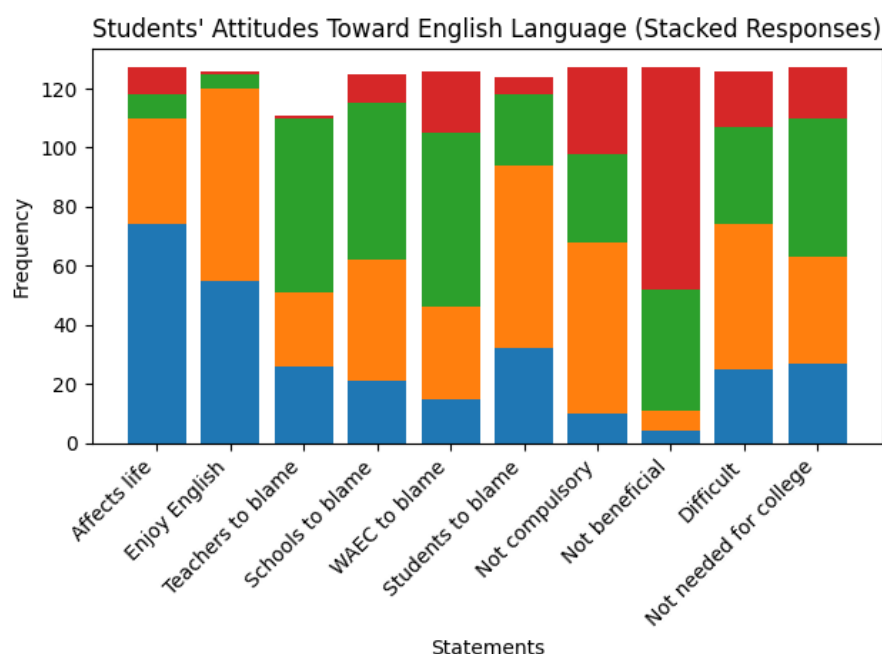
4.1 The Students' Attitude towards English Language.

Table 1: Attitude of students towards English Language

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
English Language is a subject that affects all aspects of life.	74	51	36	24	8	5.5	9	6.2
I enjoy learning English as a subject.	55	37.9	65	44.5	5	3.4	1	0.7
The teachers of English are responsible for the massive failure in English language at WASSCE.	26	17.9	25	17.2	59	40.6	1	0.7
The schools are responsible for the massive failure in English language at WASSCE.	21	14.4	41	28.2	53	36.6	10	6.9
WAEC is responsible for the massive failure in English language at WASSCE.	15	10.3	31	21.3	59	40.6	21	14.4
The students themselves are responsible for their failure in English language at WASSCE.	32	22	62	42.7	24	16.6	6	4.1
English Language should not be made compulsory in SSS.	10	6.9	58	40	40	27.6	69	47.6
English Language is not beneficial to my field of study.	4	2.8	7	4.8	41	28.2	75	51.7
English language is a difficult subject to pass.	25	17.2	49	33.8	33	22.7	19	13.1
A pass in English should not determine whether I go to college or not.	27	18.6	36	24	47	32.4	17	11.7

Source: field data 2024

Figure 2



key – **Strongly Agree**; **Agree**; **Disagree**; **Strongly Disagree**

Key Findings

1. Students' overall attitude towards English

There was a high agreement among students that English is important (51% strongly agree) and that learning English is enjoyable (82.4%) whereas a very low percentage agree that English is not beneficial (7.6%). This implies that students have a strong positive disposition towards English as a subject and as a life skill.

2. Attribution of Failure (Causation Analysis)

Factor	Agreement (%)	Interpretation
Teachers	35.1%	Minority blame
Schools	42.6%	Moderate blame
WAEC	31.6%	Low blame
Students themselves	64.7%	Majority blame

Students mostly **internalize responsibility** rather than blaming institutions. This suggests self-efficacy awareness indicating that there are opportunities for student-centred interventions.

3. Perceived Difficulty vs Interest

The data shows that although learning English is enjoyable for majority of students (82.4%) yet they perceive it as difficult (51% agree/strongly agree). This means that students struggle with being proficient in English. This gap might imply issues with instructional methods and possible weak language proficiency foundation.

4. Gatekeeping Role of English (College Entry)

42.6% disagree that English should not determine college entry and 42.6% agree/strongly agree. This perfect polarization implies that English is seen as both essential and a barrier. 52.8% agree that English should not be compulsory and with a mean = 2.38 (leaning toward disagreement but mixed) indicates a divided opinion and not a consensus. Students are most likely frustrated with the high-stakes consequence of the English examination.

In a nutshell, the critical findings from students' attitude towards English are as follows: their attitude though positive does not translate to success; students accept responsibility for their failure rather than blame institutions; English is valued but feared academically and that many are dissatisfied with English being a compulsory requirement for entry into college.

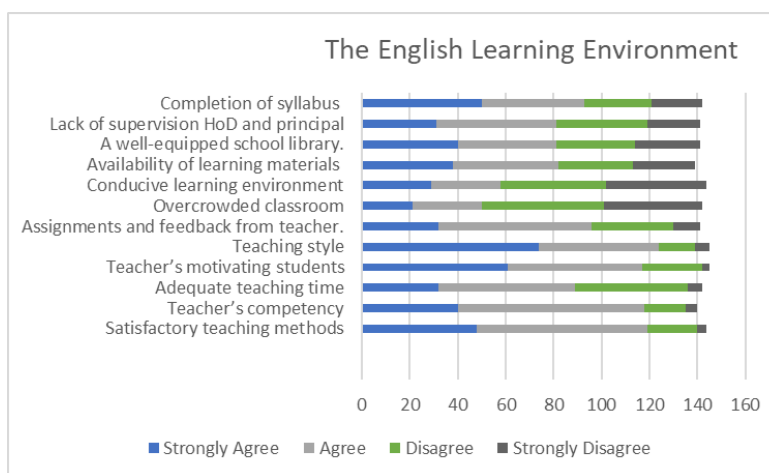
4.2. The challenges students encounter while learning English Language.

Table 2: The English Learning Environment

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Satisfactory teaching methods	48	33.1	71	49	21	14.5	4	2.8
Teacher's competency	40	27.6	78	53.8	17	11.7	5	3.4
Adequate teaching time	32	22.1	57	39.3	47	32.2	6	4.1
Teachers motivating students	61	42.1	56	38.6	25	17.2	3	2.1
Teacher's communication style	74	51.0	50	34.5	15	10.3	6	4.1
Assignments and feedback from teacher.	32	22.1	64	44.1	34	23.4	11	7.6
Overcrowded classrooms	21	14.5	29	20	51	35.2	41	28.3
Conducive learning environment	29	20	29	20	44	30.3	42	29
Availability of learning materials	38	26.2	44	30.3	31	21.4	26	17.9
A well-equipped school library.	40	27.6	41	28.3	33	22.8	27	18.6
Lack of supervision from Head of Department and principal	31	21.4	50	34.5	38	26.2	22	15.2
Inadequate treatment/completion of syllabus	50	34.5	43	29.7	28	19.3	21	14.5

Source: field data 2024

Figure 3



Key Findings

1. Teacher-Related Variables

Many students expressed strong positive perceptions regarding teachers:

1. Teacher communication skills recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.32$), indicating that students generally viewed English teachers as effective communicators.
2. Teacher motivation and encouragement also scored highly ($M = 3.21$), suggesting that teachers created interactive classroom environments.
3. Teaching methods ($M = 3.12$) and subject knowledge ($M = 3.08$) were rated positively, indicating confidence in teacher competence.

These findings imply that teacher quality may not be the major contributor to poor performance in English Language. However, responses from some students during the interview cited lack of quality tuition, guidance and mentorship on the subject as challenges they face while learning English. Some remarked that having an English teacher who was punctual and knows how to deliver well was a challenge. Others commented that they lacked trained and qualified English teachers who would be patient enough to break down the topics for them for clearer understanding. One student said: *"The teacher's method of delivering the message and the shallow treatment of the topics was a challenge."* Another who was dissatisfied with the teacher's inability to cover the syllabus said: *"My biggest challenge was with the English teacher: he taught us only essay writing for two academic years."*

2. Instructional and Academic Support Variables

1. Adequacy of lesson time obtained a moderate mean ($M = 2.78$), suggesting mixed opinions among students.
2. Assignments and feedback provision also showed moderate agreement ($M = 2.81$), implying that although assignments were given, feedback mechanisms may require strengthening.
3. Incomplete syllabus coverage recorded a relatively high concern ($M = 2.84$), indicating that many students believed the English syllabus was not fully treated before examinations.

This suggests that curriculum completion and instructional pacing may be significant issues contributing to poor performance. The interview revealed that grappling with vocabulary, grammar, tenses, subject-verb agreement, pronunciation and punctuation was also a common challenge. One student mentioned that he often *"gets stuck on big words and finds it difficult to pronounce them."* Another said: *"Mastering tenses was a challenge. The English tense system is complex with multiple tenses to express various time frame and aspects of action."* Understanding the functions of phrases and clauses, how to answer comprehension questions and to summarize were also cited as challenges.

3. School Environment and Resource Variables

Students reported substantial infrastructural and resource challenges:

Variable	Mean
Lack of learning materials	2.65
Poor library facilities	2.66
Poor supervision	2.64
Non-conducive learning atmosphere	2.30
Overcrowded classrooms	2.21

These results indicate that environmental and institutional factors negatively affect English Language learning. The relatively lower means for overcrowding and poor learning atmosphere show that although students acknowledged these problems, perceptions were somewhat divided. Insufficient and relevant 'updated' study materials, textbooks, lack of library facilities and a conducive/quiet studying environment were issues students had to contend with. One remarked that to get around the problem he would seek materials from YouTube but again he had to contend with the accents of Indian tutors. Some Science students

maintained they found English a complex subject to understand and writing an essay of 450 words was quite an ordeal for them. One student commented that “English is a broad subject and it needs practice every day.” These imply that the motivation to study the subject was met with numerous challenges that may have affected their overall performance.

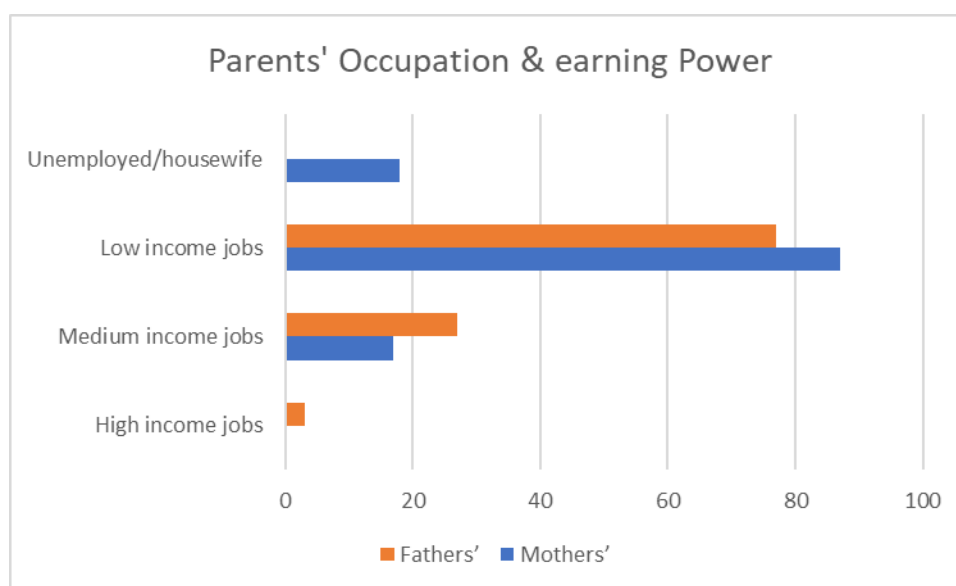
4.3. The Home-Based Factors that may affect Examination Outcomes.

Table 3: Parents’ occupation and earning power

	High income jobs	Medium income jobs	Low income jobs	Unemployed/housewife
Mothers’	0 (0.0%)	17 (13.9%)	87 (71.3%)	18 (14.8%)
Fathers’	3 (2.8%)	27 (25.2%)	77 (72.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Source: field data 2024

Figure 4



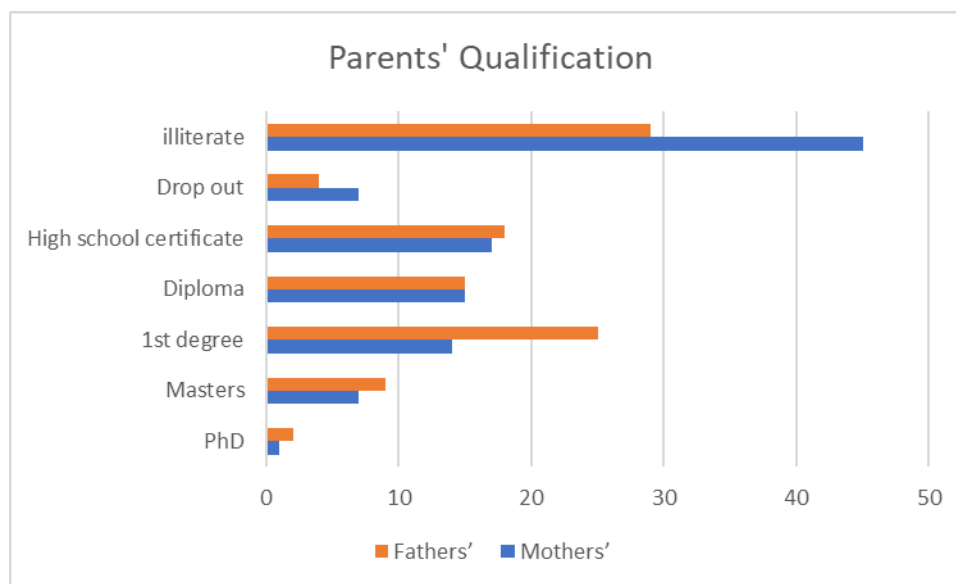
The findings indicate that the majority of both mothers and fathers were engaged in low-income occupations, with very few parents occupying high-income jobs. This socio-economic condition may negatively influence students’ academic performance because low household income often limits access to educational resources, adequate learning environments, and academic support services. Additionally, financial hardship may expose students to psychological stress, poor nutrition, absenteeism, and reduced motivation toward learning. The significant occupational disparity between mothers and fathers further suggests gender-based economic inequalities that may affect parental involvement in children’s education. Therefore, parental occupational status appears to be an important factor influencing students’ educational achievement.

Table 4: Parents’ Qualification

	PhD	Masters	1 st degree	Diploma	High school certificate	Drop out	illiterate
Mothers’	1 (0.9%)	7 (6.6%)	14 (13.2%)	15 (14.2%)	17 (16.0%)	7 (6.6%)	45 (42.5%)
Fathers’	2 (2.0%)	9 (8.8%)	25 (24.5%)	15 (14.7%)	18 (17.6%)	4 (3.9%)	29 (28.4%)

Source: field data 2024

Figure 5



The educational qualification of parents can strongly influence students' academic achievement and performance in terms of academic support at home. Parents with higher educational qualifications are generally better able to: assist children with homework, supervise study activities, encourage reading habits, monitor school progress, and communicate effectively with teachers. Given that the data indicates a large proportion of parents, particularly mothers, are illiterate, many students may lack adequate academic guidance at home. Also, where parental education is low, students may receive less educational encouragement and may develop lower academic aspirations and high levels of illiteracy and low educational attainment may limit families' ability to create supportive learning environments.

Educated parents often expose children to richer vocabulary, better communication patterns, and stronger literacy practices from an early age. This is particularly important for success in subjects like English which requires comprehension and written expression. Alternately, parents with low education may have limited earning capacity, which can affect access to educational resources and even school attendance and payment of fees. Consequently, parental educational attainment remains an important factor affecting students' academic success and examination outcomes.

4.4 The Challenges Students Encounter with the English Language Examination at WASSCE.

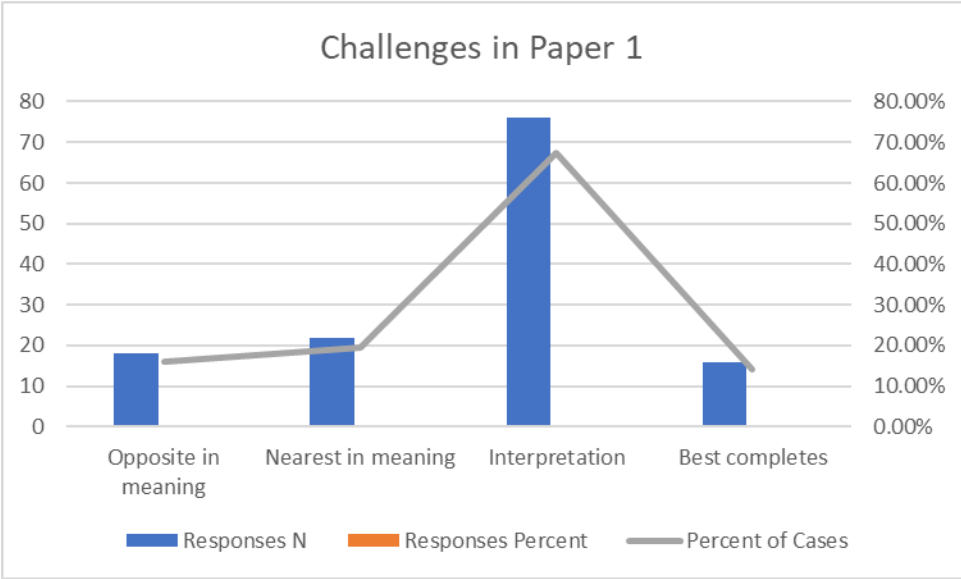
Part(s) of the English Language examination students found challenging:

Table 5: Challenges in English Paper 1

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
	Opposite in meaning	18	13.6%	15.9%
	Nearest in meaning	22	16.7%	19.5%
	Interpretation	76	57.6%	67.3%
	Best completes	16	12.1%	14.2%
Total		132	100.0%	116.8%

Source: field data 2024

Figure 6



The data for Paper 1 shows the percentage of cases for different types of challenges faced by students.

- 1. **Opposite in meaning** – 18 responses (13.6%). This category represents a challenge where students have to find words with opposite meanings. A smaller percentage of students struggled with this, but it is still a notable issue for some.
- 2. **Nearest in meaning** – 22 responses (16.7%). This challenge involves finding synonyms or words with similar meanings. The higher percentage here suggests that vocabulary and synonym-related questions are quite challenging for a fair number of students.
- 3. **Interpretation** – 76 responses (57.6%). This test involves explaining the deeper meaning of a text and it is the most common challenge, affecting the majority of students (67.3% of the cases). This indicates that many students find it difficult to understand and interpret texts accurately, which might point to issues with reading comprehension, context understanding, or inference skills.
- 4. **Best completes** – 16 responses (12.1%). This involves filling in the most appropriate option to complete a sentence or passage. It’s a smaller percentage compared to interpretation, but still a significant challenge for some.

Table 6: Challenges in English Paper 2

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
	Essays	66	44.3%	51.6%
	Comprehension	32	21.5%	25.0%
	Summary	51	34.2%	39.8%
Total		149	100.0%	116.4%
Source: field data 2024				

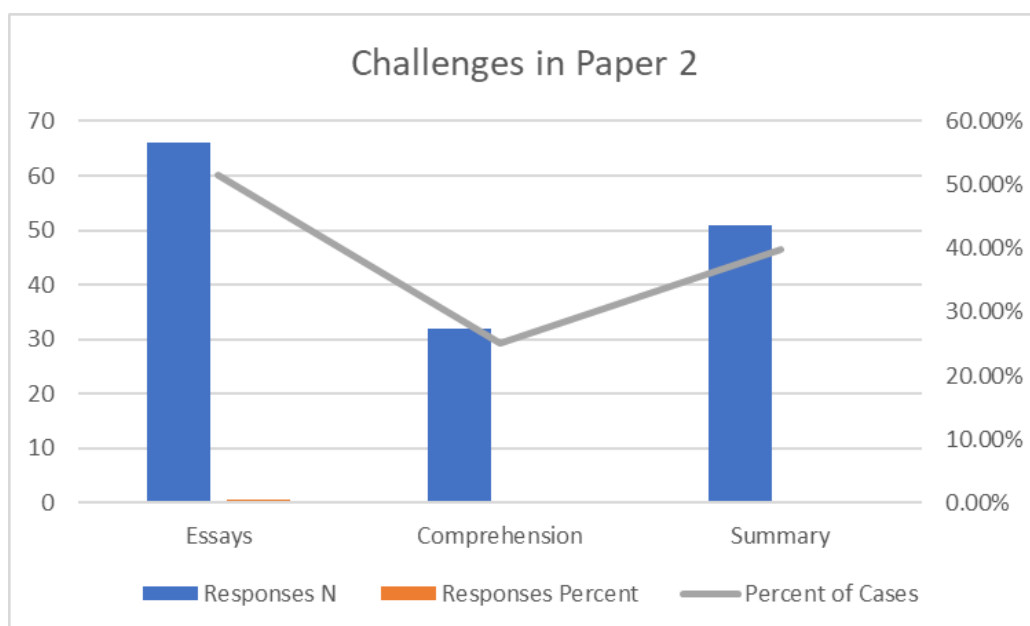


Figure 7

In Paper 2, students are examined on writing-based tasks.

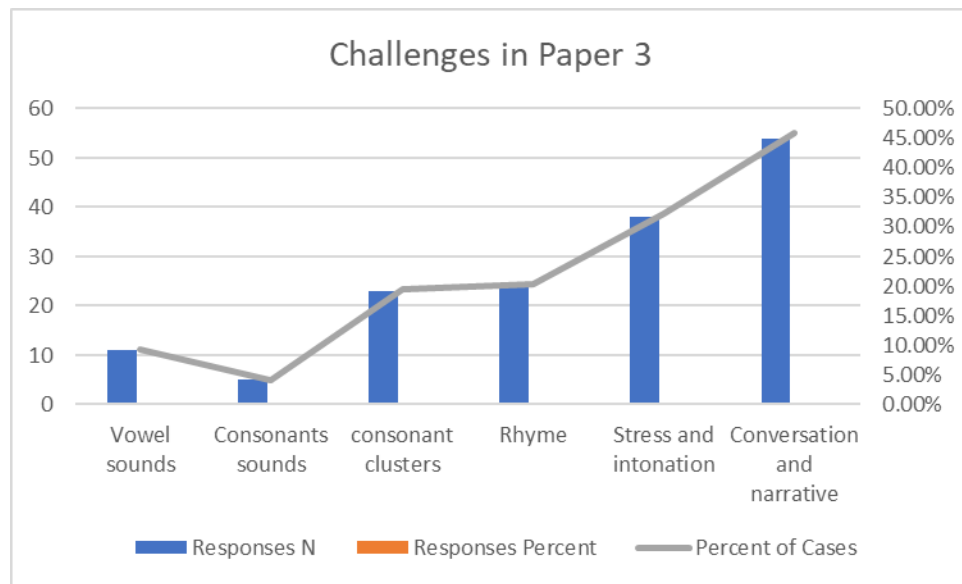
1. **Essays** – 66 responses (44.3%) Writing essays seem to be the biggest challenge, affecting over 50% of cases (51.6%). Writing essays requires strong organization, clarity, and argumentation skills, which may explain why so many students struggle with it.
2. **Comprehension** – 32 responses (21.5%). Comprehension questions are also a challenge for many, accounting for 25% of cases. This indicates that students have difficulty grasping the meaning of texts, which may be tied to reading or analysis issues.
3. **Summary** – 51 responses (34.2%). Summarizing a text involves identifying key points and expressing them concisely. While this challenge is significant (39.8% of cases), it is less widespread than essays or comprehension.

Table 7: Challenges in English paper 3

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
	Vowel sounds	11	7.1%	9.3%
	Consonants sounds	5	3.2%	4.2%
	consonant clusters	23	14.8%	19.5%
	Rhyme	24	15.5%	20.3%
	Stress and intonation	38	24.5%	32.2%
	Conversation and narrative	54	34.8%	45.8%
Total		155	100.0%	131.4%

Source: field data 2024

Figure 8



Paper 3 is a listening comprehension test focusing on oral and phonetic skills.

1. **Vowel sounds** – 11 responses (7.1%). 7.1% of students reporting difficulties with vowel sounds. It could reflect challenges in pronunciation or phonemic awareness.
2. **Consonant sounds** – 5 responses (3.2%). A fewer number of students struggled with consonant sounds. This means that many students did not face significant challenges in basic pronunciation.
3. **Consonant clusters** – 23 responses (14.8%). Consonant clusters (combinations of consonants together, like “str” in “street”) present a moderate challenge to some students (19.5% of cases).
4. **Rhyme** – 24 responses (15.5%). Similar to consonant clusters, rhyme-based challenges affect a considerable portion of students (20.3%), which could indicate difficulties with phonological awareness or language play.
5. **Stress and intonation** – 38 responses (24.5%). Stress and intonation are key components of fluent speech, and 32.2% of students seem to struggle with them, highlighting the difficulty of mastering the rhythm and tone of speech.
6. **Conversation and narrative** – 54 responses (34.8%). This category shows that a large portion (45.8%) faces challenges in listening to, understanding and interpreting conversations and narratives. This could be linked to poor listening skills and inability to interpret meaning.

4.5. Discussions

The study revealed that although learning English is enjoyable for a majority of students (82.4%) yet they perceive it as difficult (51% agree/strongly agree); their attitude though positive does not translate to success. This finding accords with that of Nor, et al (2015) which states that many ESL learners recognize the importance of English proficiency but still struggle with writing, speaking, reading, and listening.

Furthermore, majority of students interviewed (64.7%) believe that they the students themselves are the biggest contributors to their failure in the examinations. They cited that neither the schools, nor the teachers or the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) are largely responsible for their failure in English Language at WASSCE. Similarly, the study on the Causes and Effects of Massive WASSCE Failure in Sierra Leone by Lavalie (2021) lists the incompetence of students as the cause with the highest percentage (35%). Likewise, with Patrick, et al (2014), 43% of respondents stated that students’ attitude to learning English (laziness, dependence on examination malpractice, lack of seriousness in studying, poor reading culture) accounted for their failure in the examinations.

The findings of this study also reveal that though a significant number of students feel their teachers’ methods, communication skills and motivation contribute positively to their learning English Language, issues like inadequate learning materials and a lack

of an equipped library are reported by a significant portion of students as factors which may hinder their learning experience. This agrees with Alufohai's study (2016), which describes school-based factors such as the teachers' use of instructional materials as affecting senior secondary school students' achievement in English Language. This implies that the availability of instructional materials in secondary schools, are vital for the attainment of educational objectives.

Alade, et al, (2017) in their findings, concluded that candidates' socio-economic background is the most influential predictors of candidates' performance in English Language at WASSCE. These are in line with the findings of this study which reveals that a high number of mothers -87 (71%) and fathers - 77 (79.1%) have low income jobs. Similarly, a significant percentage of mothers (31.7%) and fathers (40%) had mid-level to low-level education and 42.4% of mothers and 20% of fathers are illiterate. This implies that students from low-income or unemployed families often depend solely on school for academic support, but financial hardship and parents' low educational levels limit access to resources and effective guidance. This can lead to stress, reduced concentration, and lower academic performance. In contrast, children of highly educated parents benefit from greater investment in tutoring, learning materials, and technology, along with stronger academic expectations, which help improve performance. Overall, the findings show that parental income and education significantly influence students' academic outcomes. This supports Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which holds that learning and cognitive development are shaped by social interaction and the cultural environment.

Students face major challenges across all components of the English Language examination. In Paper 1, interpretation is the biggest difficulty, revealing widespread weaknesses in reading comprehension and critical thinking, while vocabulary tasks such as synonyms and antonyms also pose significant challenges. With Paper 2, many students struggle with essay writing, summary skills, and comprehension, indicating problems with organizing ideas, identifying key points, and understanding texts. In Paper 3, difficulties with the tests on conversations, narratives, stress, intonation, and rhyme highlight gaps in listening and spoken fluency. In a nutshell, the findings point to broad weaknesses in interpreting, organizing, and expressing ideas, emphasizing the need to strengthen foundational reading, writing, and listening skills. With this finding, some new light has been shed on the specific challenges that hinder students from performing well in the subject at WASSCE. A strategic approach to addressing these issues individually may well bring about a change to the existing narrative.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the factors that affect the performance of students in English Language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in Sierra Leone between 2019 and 2023. The findings reveal an inadequate mastery of reading comprehension, limited writing skills, poor listening abilities, and a lack of effective expression of ideas. Contributing factors such as insufficient teaching resources and inadequate student preparation were also identified as barriers to success in English Language at WASSCE. To reverse this trend, strategic interventions—including continuous English Language practice, and the promotion of language-rich learning environments—are imperative. Addressing these challenges holistically will not only improve examination outcomes but also strengthen students' communicative competence for academic and professional advancement.

5.1 Recommendations

Improving students' performance in English Language at WASSCE requires a multi-pronged approach targeting the students' preparedness of the examination, the learning environment and the home. Key recommendations include regular practice in writing, comprehension, summary, and orals; establishing listening labs to build listening skills; and strengthening teaching of Paper 3. To enhance students' ability to interpret, organize and express ideas, schools should incorporate critical thinking activities (debates and creative writing), guided writing practice (brainstorming, outlining, drafting and revising) and peer review in the curriculum. Additional measures such as ongoing monitoring of English proficiency, increased parental involvement, and community reading clubs can further support student learning and better prepare them for WASSCE.

5.2 Limitations of the study

The study has provided a lot of insight into the issues that may have affected the performance of students in English Language at WASSCE between 2019 and 2023. However, some limitations or potential biases of the study should be acknowledged. The sample size of 145 respondents (past WASSCE students) may not have fully represented the broader population of senior secondary school students in Sierra Leone. Additionally, many of the students were predominantly from the Western Urban and Rural District, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Response bias is another limitation as students interviewed may have given socially desirable answers on questions related to their teachers. For instance, students may not have been quite honest about their teachers' regularity and punctuality in class, their mastery of subject matter or their teaching methods.

Declaration of Interest

Funding statement: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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Disclosure Statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. No financial, professional, or personal relationships influenced the design, execution, analysis, or reporting of the study.

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The author conducted an independent research.

All the procedures followed the ethical standards of the relevant institutional and national research committees. Written permissions for data collection and reporting was obtained from the appropriate authorities and participants.

Data Availability Statement

The quantitative data supporting the findings of this study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collected from human participants are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and confidentiality requirements but may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Secondary data used in this study are publicly available from the sources cited within the article.

Ethical considerations and Participant Well-being

Ethical considerations were integrated into the design and implementation of this study to safeguard the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of all participants. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the external examination board. Participation of past WASSCE students in the study was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and the intended dissemination of the findings. They were made aware that their names, grades or schools will not appear in any publication, although some direct quotes and/or identifiable information may appear in academic publications and presentations. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw their consent prior to publication without penalty. Signed consent forms were collected and securely stored by the researcher.

To protect participant wellbeing, the research instruments were designed to minimize potential discomfort or harm. No intrusive or sensitive questions were included, and data collection procedures were conducted in a manner that respected participants' time and personal circumstances. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained; no identifying information was collected, and all responses were coded to prevent linkage to individual participants.

Data were stored securely in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the researcher, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. In cases where secondary data were utilised, these were obtained from publicly available and ethically approved sources, with appropriate acknowledgement and citation.

Overall, the study adhered to established ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that participants were not exposed to undue risk and that their contributions were treated with integrity and respect.

Author Contribution Statement

The author conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote and revised the manuscript. This paper is an extract from a recently concluded thesis for the award of a degree of Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Education.

Ethical Approval Statement

A research was conducted as partial fulfillment for the award of an MPhil degree in education titled: "An analysis of students' performance in English language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019 to 2023)" This article submitted to your journal is an extract from this thesis.

To conduct this research, no formal or written ethical approval statement from the University or an independent review board approval was received. Working with supervisors, questionnaires were drawn, validated, tested and administered. In the opening paragraphs of the questionnaire, written consent was sought and anonymity assured from all participants after they were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To obtain data from the external examinations board, an official letter was written to the Head of the National Office (HNO) in Sierra Leone and permission was granted to use the data, but no official letter was written.

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