

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WEST AFRICAN SENIOR SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS (WASSCE) SUMMARY PASSAGES (2020-2024)

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This research investigated how language in standardized examination texts contributes to ideological formation and social conditioning in educational contexts. The study critically examined the ideological and discursive patterns embedded in West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) English Language summary passages administered between 2020 and 2024. Guided by the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory, and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the research analysed how language within these high-stakes texts constructed power relations, social roles, and normative expectations. Five summary passages were purposively selected and subjected to multi-level textual, discursive, and social-practice analysis. Findings revealed that WASSCE passages, though framed as neutral tools for language assessment, operated as ideological instruments that promoted conformity, institutional authority, and dominant socio-cultural values. Institutional actors were consistently portrayed as moral or technical authorities, while groups such as youth, farmers, and male students were constructed as passive, deviant, or deficient. Recurring themes—urban alienation, governance, youth crime, personal health responsibility, and gender imbalance—were found to align closely with state narratives. Modality choices such as “must,” “should,” and “may result in” were strategically used to impose moral evaluation and behavioural expectations. The study concluded that WASSCE summary passages played a subtle but powerful role in shaping conceptions of ideal citizenship, reinforcing normative social hierarchies through discourse. It recommended the adoption of more balanced and inclusive texts, and pedagogical approaches that cultivate students' critical reading skills.

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Introduction

In recent years, the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine educational materials has gained prominence because of its capacity to uncover hidden ideologies and sociopolitical structures encoded in language (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Language is not a neutral medium of communication; it is a site of power struggle where meanings are negotiated and ideologies perpetuated. Within the Nigerian context, the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) English Language paper—particularly the summary section—

serves as a significant discursive space that reflects the dominant ideologies and social relations subtly embedded in text. Given its mandatory status in secondary school graduation and university entry, the WASSCE summary passage is more than a test of comprehension; it is a tool through which values, worldviews, and sociocultural orientations are transmitted and reinforced.

The summary component in the WASSCE exams demands that candidates distil large amounts of information into concise expressions. However, the seemingly straightforward nature of this task lies in its deeper ideological process. As van Dijk

(2008) argues, every act of textual production and interpretation is imbued with ideological significance, because discourse inherently reflects group-based cognition and belief systems. Similarly, Fairclough (2003) emphasises that discursive practices, such as educational testing, cannot be divorced from the wider social structures that produce them. These practices play a role in constructing the 'ideal learner', often defined in alignment with the elite, middle-class values, and Eurocentric knowledge frames. Consequently, CDA enables researchers to identify the subtle processes of inclusion, exclusion, legitimation, and positioning that are characteristic of these high-stakes assessment texts. The WASSCE summary passages from 2020 to 2024, although intended for language evaluation, are ideological constructs that reflect socio-political concerns, cultural expectations, and epistemological biases. Studies by Abiola et al. (2023) and Edem (2024) highlighted the preponderance of socioeconomic and moralistic themes in such passages, revealing the underlying expectation that students should internalise dominant social norms, including attitudes toward youth behaviour, citizenship, and productivity. These narratives are not randomly selected; they are deliberately framed to reflect prevailing national discourses on unemployment, corruption, family values, and environmental degradation

Furthermore, the summary writing process is prescriptive. Students are not merely expected to comprehend content, but must reproduce distilled versions that often privilege objectivity, neutrality, and conformity to fixed syntactic forms. This reflects Fairclough's (1992) observation that "surface neutrality" in institutional discourse often masks underlying ideological investments. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) also offers insight, as it posits that language choices are always

functional and tied to three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday 1994). Thus, linguistic patterns in summary passages may shape how students interpret their societal roles, hierarchies, and values. Although the WASSCE examination is designed for standardised assessment, its implications transcend pedagogy. As Ogungbe et al. (2023) contended, language in assessment texts can serve as a mechanism of epistemic control, shaping what is considered valid knowledge. This is particularly concerning when texts normalise marginalising representations of gender, ethnicity, or youth or when they fail to present a diversity of viewpoints. In doing so, such texts risk reinforcing hegemonic ideologies under the guise of an education.

Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of English language proficiency for academic success in Nigeria, persistent failure in the summary writing component of the WASSCE exams remains a major concern. WAEC chief examiners' reports from recent years have consistently pointed to students' poor performance in this section, citing challenges in identifying main ideas, expressing them concisely, and avoiding repetition or interpretation. While pedagogical factors such as inadequate instructional techniques and curriculum design are often blamed, insufficient attention has been paid to the ideological dimensions of exam texts themselves. What ideologies do these passages convey? How do they shape students' views on society and citizenship? Are certain groups privileged or marginalised through these texts?

Moreover, critical discourse scholars, such as van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (2001), argue that educational discourse is never ideologically neutral; rather, it reflects broader power relations in society. However, few studies have systematically applied CDA to WASSCE texts. Existing research has

either focused on curriculum content (Abiola et al., 2023) or general comprehension levels (Ali, 2016), without a specific focus on how power, ideology, and discourse intersect in summary passages. This gap becomes especially problematic in light of the increasing politicization of education and the use of examinations as tools for social control and norm reproduction. This study addresses this lacuna by conducting a CDA of selected WASSCE English-language summary passages between 2020 and 2024.

Literature Review

The analysis of language use in educational settings has evolved from descriptive to critical paradigms that examine ideological underpinnings of discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a powerful lens through which institutional texts such as national examination passages may be interrogated for their implicit reproduction of social structures, dominant ideologies, and power asymmetries (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). CDA scholars argue that language both reflects and constructs social reality; therefore, institutional texts, including those used in high-stakes assessments, such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), are ideologically charged and politically consequential.

CDA emerged from a convergence of applied linguistics and social theory, underpinned by the idea that texts are not autonomous but are tied to the social conditions of their production and interpretation (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The foundational model of Fairclough (1992) posits that discourse operates in three dimensions: textual practice, discursive practice, and social practice. This model allows analysts to unpack how linguistic choices such as modality, transitivity, and intertextuality reflect ideologies and sustain power relations. Fairclough's approach is particularly apt for examining WASSCE

texts, which often adopt formal registers, hierarchical role assignments, and moral imperatives consistent with state-sanctioned norms

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (1994), supports this endeavour by offering tools to decode how texts realise experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Transitivity analysis, a key component of ideational metafunction, enables the analyst to examine how agency is assigned in exam texts - who are represented as acting, affected, or responsible. In the WASSCE summary passages, recurrent patterns have shown that government or institutional actors are frequently constructed as problem-solvers, while youths or citizens are portrayed as subjects requiring correction or compliance. This reproduces what Althusser (1971) referred to as interpellation, wherein the state constructs ideal citizens through ideological apparatuses, such as education. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model further complements this framework by asserting that ideologies reside in mental models shared by groups. He argues that educational texts are a key site for the transmission of such ideologies, because they shape the cognitive environments of students who repeatedly engage with institutional narratives (van Dijk, 1993). The discourses embedded in WASSCE texts are not arbitrary, but are aligned with dominant societal themes such as nationalism, morality, and productivity. CDA thus allows for the interrogation of how discourse in assessment materials constructs social identities and legitimizes particular worldviews while marginalizing others

Empirical studies within the Nigerian framework have reinforced these theoretical insights. Abiola et al. (2023) conducted a content analysis of WAEC comprehension passages over 24 years and found that over 33% of texts were socio-economic in nature, often addressing themes such as

unemployment, civic duty, and youth morality. These themes, while educational on the surface, also reflect macro-ideological concerns of the state and often prescribe behavioural norms. Moreover, 87.5% of the texts were “newly composed” rather than excerpted, indicating a high degree of institutional control over the ideological framing of the passages. Local-origin texts dominated (62.5%), suggesting a nationalistic preference; however, this localisation did not always reflect inclusive or progressive representations of marginalised groups.

Scholars such as Olagbaju (2019) and Aniga and Ellah (2010) have also drawn attention to pedagogical limitations and ideological biases in the WASSCE English Language curriculum. Their findings suggest that summary writing in WASSCE often emphasizes precision, conformity, and surface neutrality, which aligns with the disciplinary functions of language in institutional settings. While students are assessed for their ability to extract main ideas, the broader ideological dimension - what those ideas represent and how they frame the world - is seldom acknowledged in teaching or policy.

Wodak’s discourse – historical approach further enables an understanding of the contextual layers embedded in WASSCE text. This includes the institutional setting (WAEC as an authority), the socio-political context (post-colonial West Africa), and the ideological currents (moral nationalism, neoliberal development) that influence text construction and interpretation. For instance, during periods of political instability or public health crises, texts may feature themes such as civic duty, public hygiene, or national development, which position the reader as a responsible subject aligned with state objectives.

Interestingly, content analysis by Edem (2024) reveals a sharp decline in the use of

critical or evaluative comprehension questions in WASSCE exams—only 4.2%—compared to over 93% for literal and grammatical structure questions. This finding suggests an institutional preference for textual obedience rather than critical engagement, reinforcing Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, wherein schooling reproduces social inequality through sanctioned knowledge and linguistic capital.

In addition, Leeuwen’s (1996) model of social actor representation, which includes inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, and genericisation/specification, is relevant in analysing how WASSCE texts represent individuals and groups. For example, the recurring representation of youth as problematic or morally lax reinforces stereotypical subject positions that align with the paternalistic ideologies of control and reform. Collectively, these frameworks and empirical studies reveal that WASSCE summary passages function not merely as assessment instruments but also as ideological artifacts that contribute to shaping national identity, citizenship, and morality. The ideological content of these texts is subtle and systematic, and often escapes notice because of their routine use in classroom settings. Therefore, this literature review justifies the need for a critical interrogation of WASSCE summary passages using CDA and SFL methods that uncover both micro-linguistic patterns and macro-social ideologies encoded in text.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is particularly suited for interrogating institutional discourse, where language is used not only to convey information, but also to construct social relations, enforce ideological positions, and reproduce dominant power structures (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). As the WASSCE

English Language Summary Passages are centrally produced and administered to millions of students across West Africa, they represent a rich site for critical textual investigation, especially regarding how young learners are ideologically positioned through language.

The study draws theoretically from Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, which conceptualises language as simultaneously a text, discursive practice, and social practice. This model enables the researcher to move beyond surface linguistic features to examine the institutional and ideological implications of the discourse. Additionally, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory emphasises the role of discourse in shaping social knowledge and group ideologies. According to van Dijk (1998), discourse is a strategic site for controlling shared mental models, particularly in institutional contexts, such as education. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) further complements these frameworks, providing a toolkit for analysing how texts enact ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings through choices in grammar and lexis (Halliday, 1994). SFL facilitates the examination of transitivity, mood, modality, and thematic structures, which often encode social power and normative expectations.

The primary data for this study consist of five WASSCE summary passages selected from the examination years spanning 2020 to 2024. These texts were purposively sampled based on their availability in official WAEC publications and verified using educational archives. The selection was guided by thematic variety, representation of contemporary social issues, and the recurrence of ideologically dense narratives such as youth responsibility, moral instruction, governance, and civic behaviour. This timeframe is particularly significant given its alignment with socio-political shifts in the region, including the COVID-19

pandemic, economic downturns, and intensifying discourses on governance and national development.

Each selected text was subjected to a multilayered analysis based on Fairclough's model. At the textual level, close reading was conducted to identify recurring patterns in vocabulary, grammar, and coherence. Transitivity structures are especially important for revealing who is positioned as agentive or passive in social processes, a key indicator of ideological positioning. For instance, when government bodies are represented through material process verbs like "implemented" or "intervened", while youths are constructed through mental or behavioural processes like "should understand" or "need to learn", a discursive asymmetry emerges. Similarly, modality was analysed to assess how obligation, certainty, and authority are linguistically expressed, often in ways that encode moral imperative or sociopolitical normativity.

The discursive practice dimension involved interrogating the socio-institutional context of the WASSCE's text production and distribution. As a high-stakes examination body, the WAEC plays a powerful role in determining what kinds of knowledge and language practices are sanctioned within educational systems. Its texts, while presented as objective instruments of evaluation, are also tools of ideological socialisation. This analytical stage considered how WASSCE intertextually draws from public health campaigns, state development narratives, NGO programming, and civic education, all of which converge to reflect the dominant social ideologies. At the social practice level, this study examined how the selected texts reinforced or challenged broader hegemonic structures.

Data Analysis

Language used in institutional texts, such as public examinations, is never neutral.

As Norman Fairclough (1995) emphasizes, discourse is a form of social practice that both reflects and constitutes ideology and power relations. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) functions as a powerful gatekeeper that evaluates linguistic competence and subtly transmits normative values through prescribed texts. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine five WASSCE English Language summary passages administered between 2020 and 2024.

Analysis of 2020 WAEC Summary Passage

The 2020 summary passage recounts the personal experiences of a mother who travels to Lagos unannounced and faces unexpected challenges upon arrival. At the surface level, the narrative appears benign and anecdotal; however, Fairclough's three-dimensional model allows us to interrogate the deeper ideological structures embedded within the text.

Textual Analysis (Fairclough / Halliday)

Linguistically, the text is constructed in a conversational and anecdotal style using first-person narration ("My mother never thought it necessary..."). This personalisation fosters empathy but also invites the reader to internalise embedded moral lessons. The transitivity structures in the text subtly position the mother as a passive recipient of modern urban realities ("She met the cold unfriendly stare of a complete stranger"), while modernity itself—represented by the city, the watchman, and the taxi driver—is agentive and unyielding.

Modal verbs such as "*should*," "*must*," and "*could not*" are used sparingly but suggest norms of behaviour: "*She could not communicate effectively...*" foregrounds generational and linguistic barriers. The clause structures rely on material processes ("boarded," "called," "drove off") to illustrate movement and dislocation. There is also an implicit critique of urban alienation, conveyed through lexical choices like "cold," "unfriendly," and "stranger."

Discursive Practice

WAEC's choice of domestic, intergenerational narrative is ideologically significant. By placing moral failure at the centre of the story, the children's failure to anticipate the mother's needs, the text projects an ideal of familial obligation and social responsibility. The message to young readers is clear: modern lifestyles must not erode the traditional African values of kinship and hospitality. The intertextual echoes in the narrative also draw from common themes in civic education and Nollywood media, particularly the conflict between rural and urban complexity. Van Dijk (1998) would argue that this text reinforces shared "mental models" about aging, motherhood, and urban society, warning youth about the dangers of negligence and individualism.

Social Practice

At the social practice level, the 2020 passage reflects broader anxieties about cultural erosion and generational disconnects in postcolonial societies undergoing rapid urbanisation. It discursively privileges rural morality over urban modernity and aligns with state-endorsed campaigns on family cohesion and moral upbringing. The ideological implication is that youth must act as cultural bridges rather than rebels. This positions WAEC not only as a linguistic evaluator, but also as a moral instructor.

Analysis of 2021 WAEC Summary Passage

The 2021 Summary Passage explores the causes and consequences of tomato and food scarcity in Africa. At face value, the text is informational and structured as an exposition for agricultural challenges. However, a deeper discourse analysis reveals how institutional texts like this do more than inform; they construct relationships between citizens, the state, and socio-economic responsibility.

Textual Analysis (Fairclough / Halliday)

The passage employs a descriptive and formal tone heavily reliant on material processes and causative constructions. Verbs such as “identified”, “affected”, “destroyed”, “spoil”, “blame”, and “support” signal action and attribution. The use of agentive noun phrases such as “*experts identified*”, “*transporters blame*”, and “*government must support*” reveal how actors are assigned or denied responsibility. This aligns with Halliday’s concept of transitivity, in which language choices position social actors within power structures. A critical linguistic feature is the passive construction in statements such as: “*Farmers do not have access to storage facilities...*” and “*a lot of the farm produce is eventually trashed...*” These obscure specific agents of neglect while drawing attention to systemic failure. This linguistic pattern implies institutional accountability without naming names. Modality also plays a key role in ideology. Sentences like “*Governments must encourage...*” and “*Government should also educate...*” show high obligation modality, positioning the government as an authoritative but expected provider. The repetition of modal verbs with strong obligation values constructs a moral framework that holds the state accountable for food security.

Discursive Practice

WAEC’s decision to frame food insecurity through the lens of agricultural inefficiency and government intervention draws from broader discourses on national policy, media campaigns, and development rhetoric. An intertextual blend of developmentalist discourse and civic instruction exists. The problems are framed as known and solvable, *and the problems are not insurmountable, especially because they have been identified*—a strategy that legitimises state-centred solutions while encouraging student optimism about change.

From van Dijk’s perspective, the text operates to shape “context models” that reflect the reader’s expected social knowledge: governments are paternal figures, farmers are helpless agents, and transporters are intermediaries driven by self-interest. Students internalise these relational structures through repeated exposure to such narratives in examination settings.

Social Practice

The sociopolitical undertone of this passage cannot be ignored. Set in a post-pandemic context (2021), it responds implicitly to food crises exacerbated by COVID-19 and climate change. The representation of scarcity is naturalised through phrases such as “disease that affected”, “ravaging army worms”, and “high cost of fuel”, externalising the problem while implicitly demanding internal and national solutions. Furthermore, the text constructs a subtle call for agricultural reform that aligns with state campaigns promoting mechanised farming. The use of language like “*manual labour*”, “*support mechanized farming*”, and “*reduce waste to barest minimum*” reflects neoliberal ideologies embedded in policy texts. Thus, the WASSCE summary acts as a proxy for policy dissemination, projecting desired attitudes and behaviours to the youth who read and summarise these texts.

Analysis of 2022 WAEC Summary Passage

The 2022 summary passage provides a compelling narrative of armed robbery, drawing connections between youth unemployment, moral decay, social inequality, and institutional failure. While the passage appears didactic and condemnatory on the surface, it reveals deep-seated ideological framing of deviance, class tensions, and the state’s role in societal breakdown.

Textual Analysis (Fairclough/Halliday)

Lexically, the passage is constructed with highly evaluative and emotive language. Words like “*condemnable*”, “*maimed*”,

“inhumane”, and *“lawlessness”* immediately set the tone of moral urgency. The passage uses predominantly material and relational processes to depict robbers’ actions - *“grab money”*, *“kill”*, *“maim”* - which create a vivid portrayal of violence and social disorder. Victims are constructed in a passive voice, reinforcing their vulnerability (*“have been maimed or killed”*), while perpetrators are active and agentive. Halliday’s transitivity analysis also reveals an implicit hierarchy of responsibility. Young robbers are cast both as victims and villains: *“They blame society for their plight...”* indicates an internalized justification narrative, whereas *“indulging in acts of crime”* connotes moral failure. This passage constantly shifts between explaining and blaming, balancing social causation with individual responsibility. Modality was used to assign moral weight. Phrases like *“it is rather unfortunate”*, *“it is therefore not surprising”*, and *“must surrender their children to the right way”* suggest inevitability and the need for corrective parental action. Such epistemic and deontic modalities reinforce traditional authority that figures parents, the state, and the media as corrective forces in moral degeneration.

Discursive Practice

This text draws from a mix of media discourse, civic education, and public moral campaigns. Intertextual references include critiques of the media (*“celebrates criminal celebrities”*), portrayals of corrupt elites (*“those who acquire wealth through dubious means”*), and civic expectations of the police. These references suggest that the WAEC is echoing national concerns about growing youth disillusionment, performative wealth culture, and compromised law enforcement. Using van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model, we can argue that the text seeks to reshape shared mental models among youth, constructing criminality not just as a legal violation, but as a moral collapse that must be corrected

through parenting, education, and discipline. The passage reproduces an ideology of moral dualism as good citizens versus criminal deviants but fails to deeply interrogate systemic inequality. Furthermore, it presents poor youth as both perpetrators and the products of failed systems. This double positioning is ideologically charged and blames the media and corrupt elites but stops short of critiquing structural poverty or governance directly. Instead, it pushes an internal behavioural correction narrative that subtly absolves systemic failures by emphasising reform through family and security agencies.

Social Practice

Within the broader West African sociopolitical context, this passage reflects mounting concerns over youth unemployment, cybercrime, and moral crisis themes central to post-pandemic public discourse in Nigeria and Ghana. The passage also aligns with recent government attempts to counteract “Yahoo Yahoo” culture and glamorised criminality in media through policies like the Cybercrime Act and social reorientation programmes.

Gendered framing is also notable. While it speaks of “young people,” the examples (armed robbers, ex-convicts) are implicitly male, reinforcing stereotypes of masculinity linked with deviance. This absence of female narratives, despite the gendered realities of poverty, reflects a selective ideological framing that minimises intersectional analysis. Ultimately, WAEC constructs a moral imperative for young readers: reject crime, mistrust ill-gotten wealth, and conform to lawful, industrious behaviour. This is not merely a language evaluation; it is value indoctrination.

Analysis of 2023 WAEC Summary Passage

At first glance, the 2023 passage presents a neutral health education narrative regarding oral hygiene. However, when examined through the lens of Critical

Discourse Analysis, the text emerges as a strategic tool of social regulation, which subtly reinforces medical authority, normalises institutional knowledge, and positions individuals as morally responsible for their own health.

Textual Analysis (Fairclough / Halliday)

The narrative is delivered in the first person, giving it an autobiographical and experiential tone: *"I recently attended a program entitled Healthy Smile. This personalisation encourages emotional identification and engagement. The speaker's transformation from ignorance to awareness creates a redemptive arc that positions oral hygiene as personal moral achievement. From the Hallidayan perspective, the text is rich in material and relational processes. Examples include: "bacteria live," "teeth are lost," "plaque accumulates," "toxins travel." These material clauses depict oral decay as an inevitable biological process unless they are actively countered. Health knowledge is constructed as procedural and action-based: "must brush and floss regularly," "move the brush using a circular motion," "clean one tooth at a time."*

The use of modality was particularly instructive. Repeated expressions of obligation such as *"must", "should", "needed to be", and "recommended"* convey a strong normative stance. For instance, *"people must avoid sugary food"* and *"must visit the dentist at least once every six months"* encode moral obligations under the guise of expert advice. This aligns with what Fairclough (1995) terms the "technologization of discourse" where language is used to regulate behaviour through institutional authority.

Discursive Practice

This passage draws intertextually from public health campaigns, educational manuals, and biomedical discourse. References to *"medical research", "dental plaque", "gingivitis", and "endocarditis"*

situate the text within a Western, scientific medical framework. This reinforces the ideological authority of institutional medicine while marginalising traditional or indigenous understandings of health. There is a strong pedagogical element in the structure of the passage that first describes the problem (oral disease), then offers step-by-step solutions (brushing techniques, flossing, balanced diet), and finally provides institutional advice (dental sealants, checkups). This structure mirrors classroom instruction and highlights WAEC's discursive role of WAEC in promoting state-aligned health literacy among students. From van Dijk's viewpoint, the passage shapes the reader's mental model of health as a personal responsibility rather than a structural issue. The omission of barriers to dental care, such as poverty, lack of access, or cultural stigmas, constructs an ideal citizen with access, knowledge, and autonomy. Those who failed to act accordingly were implicitly marked as irresponsible.

Social Practice

This text reflects larger neoliberal ideologies of self-care and individual responsibility. In post-COVID Africa, where public health systems are strained and citizens are increasingly told to take charge of their own well-being, such narratives support the transfer of responsibility from the state to individuals. The passage reflects this shift: the individual is both the patient and manager, the risk, and the solution. Furthermore, the focus on scientific literacy and bodily regulation echoes global development discourse that equates hygiene with modernity and civility. The reference to oral hygiene during pregnancy introduces a gendered dimension that positions women's bodies as critical sites of public health intervention. However, this also reinforces the instrumentalisation of women's health for foetal outcomes rather than their own well-being. Through this passage, WAEC serves

not just as an examiner of comprehension but also as a surrogate health agency, broadcasting public health norms to young learners in ways that are compulsory and exam-assessed. This heightens the institutional power of the examination body in shaping future citizens' behaviour, not only their grammar.

Analysis of 2024 WAEC Summary Passage

This passage is arguably the most ideologically charged of the five, as it engages directly in debates on gender, social mobility, family dynamics, and policy. The text presents a new social reality, the rise of the educated woman, while framing it against the supposed decline of the male student. It blends data-based commentary with social anxieties, positioning the text as a site of discursive struggles over gender roles and societal balance.

Textual Analysis (Fairclough / Halliday)

The narrative structure of the passage is comparable. Expressions like *"many parents were once known to be indifferent..."* and *"it is boys who appear to have become less serious..."* set up a diachronic contrast, which constructs progress for girls and decline for boys. This thematic structuring allows the WAEC to comment on gender without explicitly sounding alarmist, yet the language choices betray the underlying concern.

Transitivity is essential for this construction. Girls are associated with material and behavioural processes such as *"proceed for higher degrees," "register," "stay to learn,"* and *"obtain first-class honours."* These verbs depict girls as the active agents of success. Boys, on the other hand, are linked to negative behavioural processes like *"absent themselves," "engage in nefarious activities,"* and *"attend parties."* The transitive contrast subtly encodes moral judgement: girls are virtuous, and boys are wayward.

Modality also reveals an evaluative perspective. The phrase *"this calls for a determined effort..."* constructs the decline in male education as an emergency. Obligatory modal verbs (*"must," "should," "may result in"*) are used to predict social consequences such as marital conflict and policy imbalance, thereby moralising the statistics. Halliday's thematic structure is visible in how each paragraph introduces a causal claim (e.g. boys lag behind → girls dominate top jobs → families suffer imbalances). This builds a teleological narrative as a cause-and-effect flow that naturalises a crisis and demands policy attention.

Discursive Practice

Intertextually, this passage engages with global development discourses on girl-child empowerment while simultaneously introducing a counter-discourse: the crisis of the boy-child. WAEC's decision to highlight this issue reflects the growing social concern in Nigeria and Ghana regarding gender reversals in education. Recent media headlines and governmental policy shifts increasingly speak to the need to "save the boy-child", mirroring the narrative structure of this passage. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory helps us interpret the ideological schemata being activated. The passage constructs a binary schema: educated girls = progress and power; uneducated boys = social dysfunction. This mental model is reinforced through repeated contrasts in performance, behaviour, and consequences. However, the text also feminises success and masculinises failure. While girls are portrayed as high achievers, this success is occasionally framed as a threat *"women will use their higher number... to dominate males."* Thus, progress is simultaneously celebrated and problematised, reflecting a broader cultural ambivalence toward women's advancement in male-dominated societies. The discursive function of the WAEC here is to warn, not just to inform. It

educates students about trends, but also transmits affect concern, pride, fear, and imbalance, making the reader not only a learner but also a moral agent expected to engage in gender restoration.

Social Practice

In broader terms, this passage mirrors the post-feminist anxiety that girls' empowerment may result in boys' marginalisation. While the passage begins by celebrating the gains of the girlchild campaign, it quickly pivots to emphasise the

potential disruption to traditional family structures and gender harmony. This reflects persistent heteropatriarchal ideologies, where women's education is accepted only insofar as it does not destabilise domestic balance. In addition, the text encodes a neoliberal, meritocratic ideology. Positions of power are linked directly to academic performance, and framing success as purely outcome-based. Structural issues such as poverty, causes of school dropout, and gendered socialisation are omitted, implying that failure is self-inflicted and solvable through effort alone.

Table 1.1 Critical Discourse Analysis Matrix of WASSCE Summary Passages (2020–2024)

Year	Topic	Agentive Actors	Passive Actors	Ideology Constructed	Modality Used
2020	<i>Hospitality & Urban Dislocation</i>	Taxi driver, urban infrastructure, narrator's family	Elderly rural mother, traditional family values	Urban modernity alienates traditional norms; neglect of elders is morally wrong	Assumptive and advisory modality ("should," "could not")
2021	<i>Food Insecurity & Governance</i>	Government, transporters, experts	Farmers, rural consumers	Food crisis caused by systemic inefficiency; state must intervene to restore agricultural security	High obligation modality ("must encourage," "should educate")
2022	<i>Youth Crime & Moral Decline</i>	Robbers, rich elites, media, corrupt officers	Victims, unemployed youth, society	Crime as a response to inequality; youth deviance is preventable with moral and parental guidance	Moral imperative and evaluative modality ("should," "must," "may")
2023	<i>Oral Health & Personal Responsibility</i>	Dentists, facilitators, individuals	General public, pregnant women	Health is a personal duty; scientific literacy and preventive habits are moral obligations	Directive and normative modality ("must brush," "should avoid")
2024	<i>Gender & Educational Inequality</i>	Girls, policymakers, employers	Boys, husbands, unqualified men	Female academic success contrasts with male decline; imbalance may disrupt homes and institutions	Deontic and predictive modality ("calls for," "may result in")

The critical discourse patterns evident across the five WASSCE summary passages revealed a consistent configuration of linguistic and ideological strategies aimed at shaping normative consciousness among students. Four key dimensions—agentive actors, passive actors, ideological construction, and modality—provide insight into how power, identity, and social values are discursively embedded in these texts.

Agentive Actors: Across all five texts, institutional entities or socially sanctioned

figures such as government officials, experts, transporters, dentists, and policymakers predominantly occupy agentive roles. This discursive positioning reinforces the notion that power and agency reside with authoritative bodies or model citizens endowed with the capacity to act, advise, or correct. These actors are portrayed as solution providers, moral exemplars, or technical authorities, thus elevating institutional competence, while subtly promoting conformity to hegemonic norms.

Passive Actors: Conversely, passive roles are consistently assigned to marginalised or failing social groups, including rural elders, smallholder farmers, unemployed youth, general members of the public, and underperforming male students. These figures are not only presented as recipients of institutional intervention, but are also often constructed as deficient, vulnerable, or misguided. This framing reflects deeper ideological undercurrents of systemic neglect, intergenerational disconnect, and gendered marginalisation, positioning these groups as needing regulation, guidance, or redemption through state or expert intervention.

Constructed Ideology: Each passage subtly encodes and reinforces a distinct ideological message under the guise of a neutral comprehension exercise. The 2020 text promotes the reversal of familial and traditional values in modern urban contexts. The 2021 passage advocates state-led agricultural reforms, framing the government as both responsible and redemptive. The 2022 piece constructs youth crime as a symptom of moral decay and socioeconomic injustice, while the 2023 text promotes neoliberal health ideologies that emphasise self-discipline, preventive care, and biomedical authority. Finally, the 2024 passage reproduces contemporary gender discourses, both celebrating female academic advancement and expressing anxiety about the social implications of male educational decline. Together, these ideologies serve as tools for social conditioning, shaping readers' perception of ideal citizenship, morality, and social roles.

Modality Patterns: The modal choices in the passages further reveal the evaluative stance of each text. Governance- and health-related narratives (2021 and 2023) employ high obligation modalities such as “must”, “should”, and “need to”, conveying strong normative expectations from both state actors and individuals. In contrast, texts dealing with crime (2022) and gender imbalance (2024)

feature predictive and deontic modality, signalling warning, consequence, and the urgency of social correction (“may result in”, “calls for”). The 2020 passage, while less modalized, still relies on subtle cues to suggest preferred attitudes, primarily through assumptive and cautionary tone. Thus, modality across these texts functions as a linguistic mechanism of soft power, guiding interpretation, and encouraging compliance without overt coercion.

Conclusion

This study critically examined five WASSCE English Language summary passages administered between 2020 and 2024, using the theoretical frameworks of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory, and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The analysis reveals that these passages, far from neutral evaluation tools, are deeply ideological texts that construct social realities, reinforce institutional norms, and encode dominant value systems. WAEC, as an examination body with continental influence, subtly shapes student consciousness through language that prescribes behaviour, moral standards, and civic identity.

Across the texts, a recurring pattern emerges: institutional actors are portrayed as agents of authority and moral correction, while individuals, especially youth, farmers, the elderly, or underperforming males, are positioned as passive, failing, or morally vulnerable. This asymmetry reflects and reproduces broader hegemonic narratives of responsibility, modernity, and social order. Furthermore, modality is strategically deployed to assign obligations, express urgency, or signal moral evaluation, reinforcing compliance with institutional expectations.

Ideologically, each passage advances a distinct but complementary agenda, from promoting traditional family values to

advocating individual responsibility and signalling gender anxieties. Taken together, these texts serve as pedagogical instruments of ideological reproduction, inculcating desired behaviours under the guise of comprehension practice. The findings underscore the need for critical language awareness in educational policy and pedagogy, as institutional texts such as these play a silent yet powerful role in shaping societal norms. Ultimately, the CDA provides a necessary lens to uncover these layers of meaning and interrogate the subtle exercise of discursive power in educational settings.

Recommendations

Considering the critical discourse analysis conducted on the WASSCE summary passages from 2020 to 2024, the following recommendations are proposed to promote more inclusive, balanced, and critically engaging language practices in standardised educational texts:

WAEC and similar examination bodies should ensure ideological neutrality and pluralism in content selection. While it is inevitable that texts reflect certain values, care must be taken to avoid one-sided portrayals of social issues, particularly those involving gender, youth behaviour, or institutional responsibility. Passages should be curated to include diverse voices, experiences, and perspectives that reflect the complexities of contemporary West African societies.

Curriculum developers and educators should incorporate critical reading frameworks into the secondary school pedagogy. Students should be taught not only to comprehend texts, but also to question them to recognise who speaks, who is silenced, and what ideologies are subtly being reinforced. This would equip learners with tools for interpreting meaning beyond surface-level grammar and vocabulary.

Text selection should avoid reinforcing stereotypes about gender roles, youth crimes, or poverty. Instead, text can be used to stimulate critical thinking about social justice, inclusion, and equity.

Future examinations should strike a balance between promoting moral values and encouraging open dialogue. Rather than presenting issues in binary moral terms (right vs. wrong, success vs. failure), texts should invite interpretive reflection and dialogue among the learners.

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