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The status, roles and challenges of teaching English language in Ethiopia context: *the case of selected primary and secondary schools in Hawassa University technology village area*

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Abstract

The main objectives of the study was to determine the status, roles and challenges of teaching English Language in Ethiopia Context, particularly in Selected Primary and Secondary Schools in Hawassa University Technology Village Area. The participants were English language and natural science teachers, students and school administrators. From Each secondary school, two, ten and two teachers, students and school administrators were selected respectively through random sampling. As a whole, 14 teachers, 46 students and 14 school administrators involved in the study. The research instruments employed to collect data were the questionnaire and interview. According to the results of the study, there were serious English language proficiency problems in the English teachers, students and teachers of other subjects in the area. The problems ranged from their ability of English language to their view which they were sharing to their students regarding the language. Similarly, results showed that teachers of other subjects ignore the language needs of students in content courses whenever they want to rush to cover the syllabus. When the root of the problems was discovered, there are various contributing factors such as poor capacity building activities, unavailability of opportunities to use the language except the English class. Hence, English language and other subject teachers should understand the learners' need of English language and the challenges the face, and employ different techniques and strategies to alleviate the problems.

Keywords: *Roles of English, Classroom challenges, Interventions*

1. Introduction

The global spread of English over the last 40 years is remarkable. It is unprecedented in several ways: by the increasing number of users of the language; by its depth of penetration into societies and by its range of functions. According to US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, in worldwide over 1.4 billion people live in countries where English has official status. One out of five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence. And by 2000, one in five- over one billion people- will also be learning English. Over 70% of the world's scientists read English. About 85% of the world's mail is written in English. And 90% of all information in the world's electronic retrieval systems is stored in English. By 2010, the number of people who speak English as a second or foreign language will exceed the number of native speakers (Hasman, 2009) ^[5]. This shows that English is used for more purposes than ever before.

The present government (EFDR) revived and strengthened the role of English as a medium of instruction. It has been stated that the New Education and Training Policy, in1994, has capitalized the role that English plays in the education system and the recent introduction of English as a subject starting from Grade one and the allocation of greater English contact hours at tertiary level indicate the present government's concern and commitment to improve the quality of English (Hailemichael, 1993; Haregwoine, 2008) ^[3, 4].

Since the introduction of the New Education and Training Policy in 1994, English has been taught as a subject in Grade 1 in all regions, without exception. Some private schools even went to the extent of using English as a medium of instruction at the primary level. Apart from this, according to the policy, regional governments may determine their own policies on the language of education in Grades 1 to 8. Thus in some regions local languages are used as medium of instruction (MOI) in Grades 7 and 8 (e.g. in Oromiya, Somali, and Tigray regions),

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in others English is still used as MOI for non-language subjects (e.g. Gambella, SNNPR), and in yet others English is partially used as MOI to teach science and mathematics (e.g. Amhara Region).

2. Statement of the Problem

Schools are institutions where youths are prepared to address economic, environmental, and cultural problems of their world. This requires active participation and proper communication with every individual in the society which they are going to join. In order to be active problem solvers, they should be able to think with clarity, imagination, and empathy. Literacy instruction is one avenue through which such contemporary critical thinking might be taught (Kress, 2003)^[7]. To accomplish this in global manner, need to have citizens who express their critical thoughts in English language which is becoming a tool for global communication.

These days, there is no doubt on the fact that the English language is becoming something of a forerunner in global communication. It is the language of choice in most countries of the world. Almost 70% of the Internet is in English (Hasman, 2009)^[5]. A good volume of the services rendered through the internet is also in English. Thus, English is playing a very significant role in bringing the world together. Therefore, many people are involved in the job of teaching English to people of foreign origin.

In spite of the heightened interest in the English language, teachers often face various difficulties and challenges while teaching English as a foreign language. In addition, students could not follow their studies in different academic institutions because their knowledge of English was poor and the teachers could not help their students since they themselves were not good at English (Alamiraw, 2005)^[1]. Also, it is not specifically indicated where the problem lies and what kind of difficulty that students and English language teachers experience in their classroom. Even, the extent to which each problem is related, and their major sources are not identified yet. Hence, it is ideal to investigate the ongoing problems and challenges so as to suggest possible intervention strategies. Similarly, it is right to sort out the problems related to students, teachers and schools so as to design possible solutions.

3. Objectives of the study

The study was conducted:

- Investigate the status of English language in the HU technology village schools,
- Identify the major challenges in teaching English in the schools,
- Sort out the sources challenges experienced by students, teachers and schools, and
- Suggest strategies of intervention to solve the problems.

4. The significance of the study

The study was conducted in the schools which are in HU technology village areas. Therefore, the teachers of English language and other subjects are beneficiaries of the study as it clearly sorted out the problems and the possible solutions related to the teaching of English language. Furthermore, the study helps students to promote their ability of English language indirectly. Similarly, institutions and organizations who are working in the area get inputs for further interventions.

5. Reviews of Related Literature

English language has several and strong functions/roles in

Ethiopia too. Of those roles English is playing in Ethiopia, the educational/instructional role is the long standing and dominant one. Trade and business communication, advertisement and entertainment, administration and office communication are some of the other growing roles English is fulfilling.

Educational Roles: English is taught as a subject from grade one and is a medium of instruction from grade nine through colleges and universities nation-wide. All universities in the country are supposed to use English as their working language; they ought to produce documents, hold meetings, write minutes and reports, etc. in English.

Apart from these nationally consistent practices, different regions have adopted different regional policies and attitudes towards English in their education system; some of the regions have made English to be a medium of instruction from grade 5, some from grade 7 and some from grade 9 (Heugh *et al.*, 2006)^[6]. In those, schools students are supposed to carry out their academic activities in English language. Especially, students are required to read different academic books which are written in English language. They are also required to demonstrate their understanding in the form of term paper, assignment, project work and various reports through English. Moreover, English language ability is mandatory even to access information about different government institutions including the FDRE Ministry of Education.

English in Entertainment and Media: One of the areas where English is most accessible in Africa, which Ethiopia also shares, is probably entertainment and the media. Though there are some local entertainment videos, video films produced in Hollywood have inundated African/ Ethiopian urban areas. Football is another popular social event to which Ethiopians have access through English, the English Premier League being the most famous programme. Television has played a significant role in captivating Africans'/ Ethiopians' attention. Despite some countries' unwillingness to privatise their state-owned television companies (Shamim, 2008)^[11] or expand the range of their broadcasts, many international news and entertainment programmes are available for free or fee through private satellite dishes.

In Ethiopia, by the 1990s, English was still rarely used in the media: there was only one official newspaper, *The Ethiopian Herald*, one television programme and one radio broadcast in English (which was limited to one hour per day). Today, radio broadcasts have still not changed much, apart from FM stations transmitting music in English. But we now have far more English language newspapers than ever before. The total number of newspapers has increased dramatically from three to more than 15. A simple internet search generates list of current print and online English newspapers and magazines (15 in number).

Internet-based communication has also grown rapidly over recent years, thanks to the expansion of IT facilities. Hence, people can access online international news outlets, including the BBC and CNN. Despite the relatively small number of citizens who are literate in English, it is amazing to observe the eagerness of many – especially young people – to chat in English. Several websites are available (including BBC opinion columns) where Africans can debate politics, economics and so on.

English as the “Language of Diplomacy”: African countries use English as one of the major working languages at AU

meetings, seminars and conferences. The leaders, policy makers and experts meet in different cities in Africa to debate multifaceted issues, mostly using English. For instance, AU parliamentary meetings are often conducted in English with parallel translations into other international working languages such as Arabic, French or Portuguese. Similar, in other continental organizations like COMESSA, NEPAD, EGAD, etc. which Ethiopia has a leading role either in hosting or chairing the sessions, African leaders come together to debate different development issues (such as climate negotiations, peace and stability, etc.) using English. University professors who participated in the 5th International Conference on Federalism, held in Ethiopia in December 2010, reported that – although participants came from many countries where languages other than English are spoken – all the sessions were conducted in English. This indicates that English language literacy is quite vital to participate and maintain mutual interest through negotiation.

6. Methods and Materials

A. Research Design

The study was a survey which was conducted on selected primary and secondary schools in Hawassa University Technology Village. The survey encompasses both qualitative and quantitative data.

B. Setting and Participants

As the study was a survey, it encompassed limited number of primary and secondary schools. Hence, from the technology village, three secondary schools; Tabour, Yirgalem and Wondogenet Secondary Schools were selected based on their locations (clusters). In addition, four primary schools were selected randomly. These are Ethiopia Tikdem, Dila Afrara, Soyama and Morocho primary Schools.

The participants were English language and natural science teachers, students and school administrators. From Each secondary school, two, ten and two teachers, students and school administrators were selected respectively through random sampling. Moreover, two, four and three teachers, students and administrators were selected respectively. That means 14 teachers, 46 students and 14 school administrators involved in the study. Among the teachers, one from each school was a natural science teacher.

C. Research Instruments

The research instruments employed to collect data were the questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher by adapting previously developed standard questionnaire in the area. This was done to maintain the validity and reliability of the tool. It was administer to the selected English language teachers and administrators. The data collected though the questionnaire was quantitative. On the other hand, the interview which incorporated five basic questions was administered to the students in different levels so as to collect the required information. It was used to collect the qualitative data.

D. Data collection and analysis procedures

First, the data was collected through administering the questionnaire to the English teachers and school and administrators. Then, the students were interviewed by the researcher and his assistant. This was a procedure that was chosen to be followed so as to manage the data properly. Regarding the analysis, the data from the questionnaire took the former position as it was more of quantitative. Accordingly, the data was computed in numerical figures and

then analyzed in texts. Following, the data from the interview was analyzed in texts based on the thematic topics that were sorted out based on the objectives of the research.

7. Results and Discussions

A. General Perception of English Language Status

The participants were asked about the significance of English language and the status of teachers’ and students proficiency of English language. All teacher and school administrators, except one English teacher who was attending his third for degree, had BA/ BSc degree in their field. Accordingly, regarding the significance of English Language, 100% responded that it is very important for academic success. However, when it comes to the teachers’ Skills and proficiency in English language in the level they are teaching, 70% responded as ‘Very low’, 26% ‘Medium’ and 4% ‘High’. Surprisingly, their students’ English language ability was termed ‘Very Low’ by 100% of the respondents.

B. Reasons for poor competence in English Language

The respondents were asked to explain the reasons behind the students’ poor skills and performance in English language. Among the lists, the most common ones which were forwarded by 60% and more of the respondents indicated the following ones. The reasons are sorted out in category for a smooth discussion.

Table 1: Students Related Problems

No	Specified Reasons	Respondents in %	Remarks
1	didn't attend pre-school	100%	
2	Automatic promotion	67%	
3	Mother tongue influence (similar representation of sounds in symbols)	60%	
4	The attempt of learning is only in Eng. Class; (only limited time is given)	87%	
5	Considering English language as something difficult to learn;	94%	
6	Being shy;	61%	
7	Not motivated to attend	72%	

According to the above table, student related problems which were confirmed by 80% and above population are not attend pre-school, the attempt of learning is only in Eng. Class; (only limited time is given) and considering English language as something difficult to learn. This indicates that the students have wrong perception regarding the language. In addition, it conveys the need to bridge gaps which are due to failure to attend preschool class.

Table 2: Teacher Related Problems

No	Specified Problems	Respondents in %	Remarks
1	Poor level of encouraging students during their attempt;	91%	
2	Using mother tongue frequently in English period;	98%	
3	Not encourage to use the language in other contexts and places;	86%	
4	Failure in using varieties of teaching methods depending on the classroom dynamics;	93%	
5	Don't attempt to raise the awareness of the students about the language;	86%	

The above table clearly shows that most of the problems specified towards the teachers were shared by almost all respondents as more than 85% of the respondents agreed in each problem. This shows that intervention is required to alleviate those problems related to the teachers. Especially, poor level of encouraging students during their attempt, using mother tongue frequently in English period and failure in using varieties of teaching methods depending on the classroom dynamics.

Table 3: Related to the Schools

No	Specified Problems	Respondents in %	Remarks
1	No resource allocation to Eng. Language improvement;	97%	
2	No training, capacity building;	100%	
3	Failed to facilitate sharing experience among teachers,	88%	
4	Giving emphasis not to the practical progress rather to quantitative results and scores;	100%	

Table 3 displays the causes of school related problems that contribute for the students' poor performance in English. Accordingly, all teachers, 100%, confirmed that they had not given any capacity building training of the teaching of English language. Likewise, they said that schools give due emphasis for the quantitative results of the students, not their actual performance. Similarly, 97% and 88% respondents disclosed that schools don't allocate resources for the improvement of English and don't give any opportunity to share experiences

with teachers in other schools respectively. This implies that though the extent of the problems is different, the listed problems are the common causes by which school administrators contribute to the poor performances of their learners in English language.

C. Problems of English language learning associated to science Teachers

In the study, natural science teachers were involved. Accordingly, they forwarded the following problems which are associated to them:

- teachers who teach content do not recognize language learning opportunities,
- having to learn a new language and required to acquire new subject matter;
- Consider it to be of marginal relevance to the learning of science;
- teachers ignore the language needs of students in content courses when under pressure to cover the syllabus;
- If, at all, there is any effort at all in incorporating language development, they just concentrate on vocabulary development,

D. Suggested Strategies of Intervention

The stakeholders-teachers, students and the school administrators were asked to suggest possible intervention strategies so as to alleviate problems that are related to the teaching of English language in order improve the learners' performance. The following are among the common suggestions forwarded.

For Students	For Teachers (English/ Other Subjects in English)	For School Administrators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Should be encouraged to take more time to practice ❖ Avoid becoming shy in class; ❖ Give due attention to the procedures that the teacher gives in a class; ❖ Should work their assignments, class and home works; ❖ Perform activities in group and pairs, even after class; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Use variety of techniques/ Methodologies of real context such as short dialogues, dramas, songs, poems, etc. ❖ Let students participate actively in class; ❖ Design program for students to carry out different activities such as reading, etc. ❖ Read different reference materials to scale up their competence; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Setting English language clubs, ❖ English language day- Awareness; ❖ Setting English mini- media in schools; ❖ Design a training and experience sharing for English teachers; and ❖ Make learning materials such as teacher's book and student's text available.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Conclusions

Many countries throughout the world are beginning to see English as a basic educational requirement for all rather than simply as a desirable accomplishment for some (Maurais & Morris, 2003) [9]. In addition, the latest and the most advanced discoveries and inventions in science and technology are being made available in English language which is becoming the means of scientific discourse. Developing countries, like Ethiopia, are in need of these scientific knowledge and technology.

However, the results of study have boldly revealed that the status of English language is very poor in the primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, this was common for the English teachers, students and teachers of other subjects. The problem seems deep rooted due to various contributing factors such as poor capacity building activities, unavailability of opportunities to use the language except the English class and etc.

The problem was not only limited to the English language but also extended to other subject teachers. In this case, the problem was both their ability of English language and their view which they were sharing to their students regarding the language. The students disclosed that teachers of other subjects

ignore the language needs of students in content courses whenever they want to rush to cover the syllabus. If at all, the only opportunity they give to their students was vocabulary, even that was by translating in to mother tongue or Amaharic.

8.2 Recommendations

Thus, it is a high time to reform the way of teaching English language in the way that it assist students (future professionals) to deal with the latest scientific inquiries and technologies. Therefore, the following are recommended suggestions to minimize the problem:

- ❖ Schools should develop additional programs as an opportunity for students to practice the language more. In addition, the established ELIC should work actively in student centered manner. Schools should supply books, electronic technologies (DVD, TV, internet and other audio visual technologies) which reasonably build students language ability.
- ❖ English language teachers should design important program and activities based on their learners' social and cultural context. Also, they are expected to carry out research activities on how to develop the learners' (even adult learners) English language proficiency, and they should advice their learners to increase their motivation to

- practice English.
- ❖ Both English language and other subject teachers should get intensive capacity building training so as to develop not only their English language skills but also their attitude and understanding towards the role of English language to their students in relation to developing the learners' subject wise knowledge.
- ❖ Learners should be trained to take responsibility for their own learning and exploit opportunities which they encounter out of their classes. They should not wait opportunities to come to them rather they should create them. They should change their attitude and motivate themselves considering the world wide influence of English language.

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