

## THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN ETHIOPIA

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The writing of articles on this topic seems to be an occupational disease in Ethiopia. The writing of articles on this topic, in fact, seems to be in inverse proportion to the quality of the teaching itself.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the writing of articles is rivalled only by the writing of reports. The object of this particular article is to unfile a report on English teaching in Ethiopia written 11½ years ago, to reveal how few of its excellent recommendations have been implemented and to suggest what should and could be done in the next few years. If this seems presumptuous, and it probably is, I should like to point out that I am now halfway through my fourth year in Ethiopia. I have read and written many reports, letters, memoranda and notes on this topic. During this time I have seen remarkably little done about any of the suggestions put forward for the improvement of English teaching. In the past few months, however, with the appointment of two part-time English Language Teaching advisers to the Ministry of Education and with the appointment of new officials in the Ministry of Education itself, it does appear that things are on the move. This, then, is my motive for dusting off an apparently long-neglected report which, if its recommendations had been implemented, would have made the writing of this particular article unnecessary.

This report, entitled *The English Language in Ethiopian Education*, was a special report by Mr. Peter Wingard<sup>2</sup> to the Imperial Ethiopian Ministry of Education's Long-Term Planning Committee. At the time, June 1955, Mr. Wingard was Language Education Adviser to the Ethiopian-United States Cooperative Education Program (EUSCEP). In this report Mr. Wingard made 38 specific recommendations, covering every aspect of English teaching, including in-service training, the preparation of new text-books, the need to revise the curriculum and the need for modern ELT<sup>3</sup> methods. I propose to quote the particular recommendations that I consider crucial and to summarize what, if anything, has been done about them and what remains to be done about them.

### Recommendation 2

The Ministry of Education should request the Language Education Project, when it is set up, to investigate the closely linked questions: (a) "In which grade should students begin learning English?" and (b) "In which grade should English become the language of instruction?"

At present, in different parts of the country, English begins in grade 1, grade 2 or grade 3, despite the Ministry's policy that English should begin in grade 3. No research has yet been carried out to ascertain whether pupils who must first learn

1. See the examiners' reports on the English Language papers in the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination for 1964, 1965 and 1966.
2. Mr. Wingard is now director of the special Teaching English as a Second Language programme in the Department of Education of the University of Manchester, England.
3. ELT is the standard abbreviation for English Language Teaching. TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) is also used.

Amharic as a second language (the majority, it appears) are able to learn English at the same time as they begin to learn Amharic, or whether this is desirable even if it is possible. For practical and financial reasons the Ministry of Education's newly-appointed ELT Textbook and Curriculum Committee has recommended that English be started in grade 3. English becomes the medium of instruction in grade 7, although after 4 years' inadequate English-teaching it is extremely doubtful whether most grade 7 students are linguistically capable of studying every subject except Amharic in English. Textbooks for other subjects are frequently too difficult; students have not been taught to read English properly nor to listen to spoken English carefully. There are no suitable Amharic textbooks for the other subjects at this level but it seems that grade 7 might be too early for the changeover to English. Clearly, research is needed.

**Recommendations 3, 4, and 5 (combined and summarized)**

Research should be carried out into the vocabulary and concepts of Ethiopian children at different age and grade levels, as a basis for the production of scientifically designed learning materials in Amharic and English. Specialists in the teaching of mathematics, science and social studies should prepare a new series of basic texts, *in simple language*, for the various grade levels up to and including grade 8. In each text the level of concept and vocabulary must be adapted to the grade it is intended for.

According to the final report of the Amharic Commission at the recent *Secondary Curriculum Development and ESCLC Seminar*, there are still no suitable texts for the teaching of Amharic. Nor is there a sufficient number of properly trained Amharic teachers. As far as I know, basic texts, *in simple language*, prepared according to the level of concept and vocabulary of each grade, for the teaching of mathematics, science and social studies, are still not available. It might be objected that this is not the concern of someone concerned with English-teaching. "Objection over-ruled." English is NOT just another subject. It is a medium from grade 7 onwards. It is surely reasonable to expect that, when English is used for the teaching of science, geography, history and mathematics from grade 7 onwards, the students will have already had an adequate grounding via the medium of Amharic. In addition, a reasonable fluency in Amharic would make the English-teacher's job easier. At present, it seems that the first attempts at teaching students to think and express themselves clearly and logically have to be made in and through English. This is clearly undesirable, impossible and ridiculous.

**Recommendations 6, 7 and 8**

Reading aloud, except for the purpose of speech training, should be discouraged in the schools. Silent reading for comprehension, followed by testing, should be encouraged. Multiple choice type tests should be encouraged. Reading comprehension tests on readers now in use in schools should be produced for use in schools. A short practical teachers' manual of reading comprehension should be prepared and distributed.

Reading aloud is still one of the commonest English lessons in every grade where students can read. Teachers are slowly coming to realize the importance of

4. January 1967, Addis Ababa. The final report has not yet been published.

slow reading, although at the university one can still hear many students reading. Multiple choice tests on comprehension are spreading. The comprehension section of the ESLC English Language paper is now almost completely objective and at the recent seminar, referred to on page 41, it was recommended that almost 80% of the English Language examination should be of the objective and/or multiple choice type.

Two Peace Corps Volunteers have produced a very useful little manual on the teaching of reading comprehension, designed for Teacher Training Institute students. This is to be published shortly, by Oxford University Press. It has already been distributed, though not over the whole country, in mimeographed form.

It should be noted here that each book of the *New Oxford English Course for Ethiopia*, Book 1 of which was introduced into the schools in September 1966, will be accompanied by detailed teachers' notes which explain each teaching step and technique in great detail.

#### Recommendations 9, 10 and 11

School libraries should be developed; the provision of funds for school libraries should be a *regular* feature of the Ministry of Education *annual* budget; an Ethiopian should be trained abroad for the post of School Libraries Director.

I'm afraid I don't know, and have been unable to find out, how much, if any, money is allocated by the Ministry for school libraries.<sup>5</sup> At least the Haile Sellassie I University Faculty of Education now offers a Library Science "minor." The course is directed by Dr. C. P. Shukla, a member of the UNESCO Secondary Education Project team. At present 84 Education Faculty students are taking Library Science as their "minor" (8 third year students, 15 second year students and 61 first year students). I must confess to being a little alarmed at the figure for first year students, 61. I would feel much happier about it if I could be sure that in 4 years' time there would be 61 Senior Secondary schools which all had (a) a room they could use as a library, (b) enough books to put in it and (c) students who had been trained to use a library.

I think it's appropriate to add here that while 84 first, second and third year Education Faculty students are taking Library Science as a "minor," only 41 students are "majoring" or "minoring" in Amharic and only 45 "majoring" or "minoring" in English. It should also be noted that quite a few of these students are combining Amharic and English. Shouldn't it be our concern to prepare more Ethiopian teachers of Amharic and English before preparing Library Science "minors?" Someone seems to have got his priorities wrong.

5. Since this article was written, the writer is happy to say, the Ministry of Education has negotiated a loan with the International Development Agency for the provision of standard library units for all Ethiopian Junior and Senior Secondary schools. For a Junior Secondary School with 350 students, Eth. \$2,100 will be allocated for the library. For a Senior Secondary School with 500 students, Eth. \$5,000 will be allocated. For a combined Junior-Senior school Eth. \$7,100 will be allocated. Books have been selected by the various Ministry of Education subject committees in each of the following areas: Geography and Economics; French (Senior schools only); Science; Useful Arts (Applied Science); Fine Arts; Amharic; History; Travel and Biography; Fiction and Readers; Technical and Vocational; Teachers' Reference; General Reference. The total provision will probably be for about 150,000 books.

### Recommendations 12 and 13

New books in simple language, in Amharic and English, on topics such as health, agriculture and folklore, should be prepared for class or library reading. A regular school newspaper, in graded editions, should be developed and circulated.

The only books I know of which fulfil this requirement are two which Oxford University Press hope to bring out within the next year. One is a book of Ethiopian folk-tales, translated into English suitable for seventh grade students, and accompanied by comprehension, structure and simple writing exercises. The other is an adaptation of *The Lion's Whiskers*, (*Tales of High Africa*).<sup>6</sup> The stories in this have been simplified and multiple-choice vocabulary and comprehension exercises suitable for Senior Secondary students have been added. These stories were collected from all over Ethiopia some years ago.

At present, only *Megeletcha*, the Prince Bede Mariam Laboratory School magazine, mainly intended for teachers, and *Teacher's Forum*, a Peace Corps magazine, are distributed to every school. The Ministry of Education's excellent *Teaching News* only managed to appear three times and has not appeared for almost a year now. If the practical difficulties could be overcome, a school newspaper, in English and Amharic, would be an excellent idea. One hopes that the initiative can be taken.

### Recommendations 16, 17, 18 and 19

All teacher-training programmes should stress English, English-teaching method and English speech. In-service teacher education programmes should do the same. A "method" specially designed for teaching English to Ethiopians should be developed. A "Language Education Adviser" should visit schools frequently, to encourage and help English-teachers, especially in the lower grades.

✓ The need for more specialized English-teaching training is now being recognized and, in particular, the need for specialist teachers of English as a second language in the elementary schools. In-service training, vital as it is, is still almost non-existent. To cite one example: in the summer of 1966 fewer than one-twelfth of the teachers who would be using Book 1 of the *New Oxford English Course for Ethiopia* in September, 1966, attended 5-day workshops designed to show the teachers how to use the new techniques and materials. Not one follow-up workshop has been organized since then for the other eleven-twelfths. There are, of course, the Faculty of Education Summer School for elementary teachers and various Ministry of Education up-grading courses, but by in-service training I mean going out to the teachers where they are actually teaching and helping them to cope with their actual teaching situation. Our experience at last year's Faculty of Education Summer School was that the teachers attending Summer School were very reluctant to go to the extra classes that were specially arranged to introduce them to Book 1 of the *New Oxford English Course for Ethiopia*. They said they wanted "college credit" or some kind of increment for attending these extra classes, which, after all, were intended to help make them better teachers. This is *not* in-service training.

6. *The Lion's Whiskers (Tales of High Africa)*, Davis and Ashabrunner, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1959.

As far as a new "method" is concerned, it is hoped that the *New Oxford English Course for Ethiopia* embodies a method which, while it is not exactly a new method designed exclusively for Ethiopia, will prove to be an effective way of teaching English to Ethiopians. The final report of the English Commission, at the recent Curriculum Development Seminar, also emphasized the need for ELT advisers and for mobile teams of TESL experts who could help elementary school English-teachers. These advisers and experts should NOT be regarded as "Inspectors."

#### Recommendations 21 and 22

Newly-arrived foreign teachers should be given a short, informal course to familiarize them with ELT problems in Ethiopia and with modern TESL methods. Conferences and workshops should be organized to pool English-teachers' experiences and ideas.

At present, the majority of Secondary School English-teachers are either U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers or Indians. Only the Peace Corps Volunteers are given such an introduction to the English-teaching problems in Ethiopia and to modern TESL methods. In addition, regular workshops are organized for Peace Corps teachers. As far as I know, Indian English-teachers are NOT introduced either to the ELT problems or to modern TESL methods. One of Mr. Wingard's later recommendations refers to "Teachers of English from other countries .... whose own command of English is, in many instances, unsatisfactory... (who) tend to show preference for formal grammar rather than intensive language practice... (whose) horizons are too closely bound by examination requirements... (and who) sometimes encourage memorization rather than real comprehension." This same recommendation refers to students with "wrong habits of pronunciation and expression which have actually been taught to them as correct English by their teachers." Eleven and a half years later the English Commission of the Secondary Curriculum Seminar reached the same conclusion: all expatriate teachers who will be called upon to teach English should attend an intensive introductory course on TESL methods, BEFORE they start teaching.

#### Recommendations 26 - 36

(These all referred to the English curriculum)  
There should be more stress on oral practice at all stages and the early stages should be entirely devoted to oral practice. Students need more practice in sentence construction before paragraph and essay work. Written work should be in short, frequent assignments. More attention should be paid to handwriting, neatness and layout in the "middle" schools. A minimum syllabus of only essential grammar should be devised. Grammar exercises must give practice in the *actual use* of the item being learned. Students to be given a *thorough mastery* of an essential minimum vocabulary. Every student to have a suitable dictionary and to be taught how to use it. The official Ministry of Education English curriculum to be revised completely in collaboration with serving teachers and "other specialists."

I can only say that this is an almost perfect, A-grade summary of what was decided in the English meetings of the January, 1967, Secondary Curriculum Seminar. Mr. Wingard recommended all this in June, 1955.

#### Recommendation 37

The Ministry of Education should appoint a secondary school English-teaching textbook committee so that new textbooks can be appraised and better textbooks can be brought into use with the minimum of delay.

Such a committee was appointed in December, 1966. So far, February, 1967, this committee has made firm recommendations about the textbooks that should be used in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 12. These recommendations include Books 1, 2, 5 and 10 of the *New Oxford English Course for Ethiopia*, already, or to be, published by Oxford University Press. Tentative recommendations have also been made about new books for grades 7, 9, 10 and 11. Books 3 and 4, for grades 5 and 6, are scheduled to appear in 1968 and 1969 respectively.

The preparation, printing and distribution of new books, is, however, only part of the battle. If and when the new books get into the hands of the boys and girls in the classrooms, the question is: do the teachers know how to use them properly? Can the teachers read and understand the accompanying Teachers' Notes? Can they pronounce all the English correctly? Can the students understand the teachers? These questions are directly related to Mr. Wingard's final recommendation:

#### Recommendation 38

Teachers' handbooks, on various aspects of the teaching of English in Ethiopian schools, should be prepared and published.

Yes, of course they should, but will they be used? And if they *are* used, will they be used properly?

I don't want to end on a pessimistic note. As I said at the beginning, such an interminably long while ago, things now seem to be on the move with the appointment of the new Ministry officials, the appointment of two ELT advisers and the appointment of an ELT Textbook and Curriculum committee. BUT, and I'm afraid I must add this, all of us who are concerned with English-teaching should first stop to think about the state of English-teaching now and should then reread Mr. Wingard's 11½ - year-old recommendations. In July 1978, will the dust have to be blown off the article you've just read, and similar comments made? We can at least hope that the final report and recommendations of the English Commission of the Secondary Curriculum Development and ESLC Seminar will not meet with such a "dusty answer," even though they echo, albeit unwittingly, so many of Mr. Wingard's recommendations. The TESL wheel has indeed come full circle.