

WHY NOT ABANDON ENGLISH TEACHING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL?

by John Rogers

- I. "The state of English teaching in Ethiopia is critical . . . The crisis has its origin in the elementary schools."

(The first two 'Basic Considerations' of the **Final Report of the English Commission**, at the Secondary School Curriculum Development and E.S.L.C. Examination Seminar, Addis Ababa, January, 1967).

- II. "Of the 100 pupils starting the first grade only about 21% reach the 6th grade and less than 6% the 12th grade."

(From **School Census for Ethiopia. 1963/64**, published by the Imperial Ethiopian Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, Addis Ababa).

- III. "It is not possible to dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper . . . It is not possible to look in a different direction by looking harder in the same direction."

(From **The Use of Lateral Thinking**, by Edward de Bono)

There are several ways of combining the facts and ideas contained in the three quotations above. Admittedly, they are arbitrarily chosen quotations, like most quotations which authors choose to illustrate an argument. Nevertheless, it would be interesting and revealing to compare the ways in which various experts currently deepening elementary school English-teaching holes in Ethiopia would use this given material and to compare the different conclusions they would reach about the present writer's concern: what is to be done about English teaching in Ethiopian elementary schools?

Most people who have had any contact with the elementary schools, and the teachers and pupils in them, would probably agree that "something needs to be done about English teaching at this level." What suggestions have been made during the past five years?

- I. Select, train and pay specialist English teachers for the elementary schools, since it is clearly unrealistic to expect **every** elementary school teacher (a) to be proficient in English and (b) to be able to teach English properly.
- II. A massive in-service teacher-training scheme should be organized. This training should take the form of a crash course to be given during the first weeks of the school year, and teachers undergoing it should be "suitably remunerated".
- III. Textbooks and materials must be considered as expendable, **not** accountable, items and must reach the students in the classroom. Any hold-up in distribution makes the implementation of **any** programme impossible.

- IV. In order to recruit and retain good English teachers in the profession, it is imperative to pay competitive salaries and adequate regular increments. Provision should be made to include a hardship allowance for appointments in remote places.
(These four recommendations formed the Basic Considerations of the **English Commission Final Report**, referred to above.)
- V. Start teaching English earlier, i.e. in grade 1, since 4 years' teaching isn't enough.
- VI. Postpone the teaching of English until grade 6, "because of the poor standard of English teaching in the elementary grade". (From one of the English Commission discussions at the January 1967 Seminar.)
- VII. Organise mobile teams of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) specialists to visit all schools in the Empire to advise and assist teachers.
- VIII. Provide strong incentives (i.e. financial) for in-service teacher-training programmes.
- IX. Set up an English subject inspectorate free to devote its time to visiting schools to give advice and help to teachers in the implementation of the curriculum and in teaching methods.
- X. Assign the best qualified Ethiopian teachers (and, if possible, U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers) to the lower grades, since it is the early years that really count in language-learning.

Unfortunately, most of these proposals require money for their implementation. In addition, the whole idea behind them, namely that English is the medium of instruction from grade 7 onwards and that therefore the teaching of English has got to be drastically overhauled and improved, has never, to the present writer's knowledge, really been given the unqualified official, ministerial support without which the situation will never improve.¹ Lip-service has certainly been paid to the idea, mainly, one suspects, because lip-service doesn't require a budget. But one has never been encouraged to feel that there is a real, determined commitment, except on the part of a few dedicated individuals who struggle on in the absence of such an official, government commitment.

It is now time to turn to the mysterious references to the digging and deepening of holes. The reference comes from an interesting, provocative little book, **The Use of Lateral Thinking**, by Edward de Bono.² Mr. de Bono's main thesis is that the conventional, logical process of thinking, which, according to the author, since Aristotle, "has been exalted as the one effective way in which to use the mind," may not be the most useful kind of thinking for generating new ideas. The deepening and improving of existing holes and a reluctance to think of

1. It is interesting in this connection to compare the situation here with the situation in Uganda just before the **New Oxford English Course for Uganda** was introduced. When the 1963 Uganda Education Commission issued its report (sometimes referred to as the 'Castle Report'), the then Minister of Education gave it his personal backing and, as a result, the English-teaching recommendations started being implemented almost immediately, including a budget-allocation for massive in-service and holiday courses for all teachers who would be called upon to teach from the new textbooks.

2. Jonathan Cape, London, 1967, 18/-.

new places for new holes are effective illustrations of his distinction between these two kinds of thinking, vertical (= logical) and lateral: "Vertical thinking is digging the same hole deeper; lateral thinking is trying again elsewhere."

Let us see how hole-digging and hole-deepening are related to the problem of elementary school English in Ethiopia. The particular hole we are concerned with is the Ministry of Education policy that English shall be taught in elementary grades, to be precise from grade 3 to grade 6. No one now really knows who decided to start digging this hole, but what we do know is that since the hole was started there has been an uninterrupted flow of "experts" who have helped to deepen and enlarge the hole, but they don't seem to have improved it, unless deepening and enlarging a hole are synonymous with improving it. As Edward de Bono says :

... But if the hole is in the wrong place, then no amount of improvement is going to put it in the right place. No matter how obvious this may seem to every digger, it is still easier to go on digging in the same hole than to start all over again in a new place ...

... The disinclination to abandon a half-dug hole is partly a reluctance to abandon the investment of effort that has gone into the hole without seeing some return. It is also easier to go on doing the same thing rather than wonder what else to do: there is strong practical commitment to it ... Yet great new ideas and great scientific advances have often come about through people ignoring the hole that is in progress and starting a new one ...

The writer contends that the hole labelled, "Teach English from grade 3 to grade 6," is a hole that has been made big and deep enough. It may well be a hole that should be abandoned. Ethiopian education may need a new hole started, a hole labelled, "Don't start teaching English until grade 7."

This suggestion, if it isn't ignored (which is the most likely consequence), will be met with cries of horror and possibly outrage from the individuals and "experts" who have devoted so much time and energy to the enlarging and improvement of the hole which, it is now suggested, they should climb out of and abandon.

What of these "experts", though? Mr. de Bono has an unusual explanation of how an expert is an expert :

... An expert is an expert because he understands the present hole better than anyone else except a fellow expert, with whom it is necessary to disagree in order that there can be as many experts as there are disagreements — for among the experts a hierarchy can then emerge. An expert may even have contributed towards the shape of the hole. For such reasons experts are not usually the first to leap out of the hole that accords them their expert status, to start digging elsewhere. It would be even more unthinkable for an expert to climb out of the hole only to sit around and consider where to start another hole ... So experts are usually to be found happily at the bottom of the deepest holes, often so deep that it hardly seems worth getting out of them to look around.

To the present writer, after 5½ years of being an "expert" at the bottom of the elementary English hole, being guilty of helping to enlarge and deepen it, it seems time to get out of this hole and look around for sites for more useful, more productive holes.

What are the facts? English is presumably taught from grade 3 to grade 6 to prepare students for the beginning of English-medium teaching in grade 7. How many students survive from grade 3 to 7? It's extremely difficult to get hold of accurate, up-to-date statistics, but a look at the school censuses for 1963-64 and 1966-67 and at the projected figures for the educational section of the Third Five-Year Plan may give us a rough idea. According to Table 7 of the 1963-64 school census,³ in all schools (government, community, mission, private and church) there were 45,694 students in grade 3, 34,153 in grade 4, 22,680 in grade 5, 15,721 in grade 6 and 11,029 in grade 7. The 1966/67 figures⁴ give a clearer picture of the depressingly low survival rate from grade 3 to grade 7. The following figures are for the years 1961 to 1966, for all types of primary schools (government, private, mission and church) :

Grade	Year	Enrolment
Grade 3	1961/62	36,495
Grade 4	1962/63	29,128
Grade 5	1963/64	22,680
Grade 6	1964/65	19,111
Grade 7	1965/66	15,634
		(— 7,367)
		(— 6,448)
		(— 3,569)
		(— 3,477)
		(—20,861 in all, grade 3 to grade 7)

It's interesting to note here that the figure for grade 8 for 1966/67 was 15,391; i.e. only 243 students dropped out after grade 7.

45,694 children started learning English in grade 3 in 1963/64. By the time this group reaches grade 7, which is where English is required, it is probable, judging from available statistics, that more than half of them will have dropped out. For the period 1961 to 1966, 20,861 children who started learning English in grade 3 didn't survive to grade 7, where English is the teaching medium for every subject other than Amharic. If we look at estimated enrolment figures from the Third Five-Year Plan, a similar picture emerges. The following figures are taken from Tables 1a and 2a which are only for government schools. The estimated enrolment for grade 3 pupils in 1968/69 is 70,000. This is how the figures go from grade 3 to grade 7, for the same group of children :

3. **School Census for Ethiopia:** 1963/64, Bureau of Educational Research and Statistics, Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, Addis Ababa, Page 6.

4. **School Census for Ethiopia (Part 1): 1966/67,** Office of Educational Planning and Statistics, Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, Addis Ababa, page 14.

Grade	Year	Estimated Enrolment
Grade 3	1968/69	70,000 (—10,000)
Grade 4	1969/70	60,000 (— 2,000)
Grade 5	1970/71	58,000 (— 2,000)
Grade 6	1971/72	56,000 (—17,900)
Grade 7	1972/73	38,100 (—31,900 in all, grade 3 to grade 7)

If these figures mean anything at all, they mean that of 70,000 boys and girls who start learning English in grade 3 in 1968/69 it is expected (even planned) that only 38,100 will survive to grade 7, where English becomes the medium. Somewhere along the line, 31,900 boys and girls will have dropped out. 10,000 will have dropped out after their first year of English, and a staggering 17,900 will drop out after their fourth preparatory year of English. Why are we trying to teach English to so many potential, "planned" drop-outs? Is it fair to the drop-outs, to give them the idea that they will all be going on to a junior secondary school? Isn't the Ministry of Education concerned about cost-effectiveness? Is it worthwhile spending so much time, effort and money on the production of large numbers (even thousands) of potential English-speaking shoe-shine boys and car-watchers? What are these 31,900 children going to do with their pathetic scraps of English?

If a so-called Plan envisages such a high rate of attrition, doesn't it occur to some of the "experts" that the Imperial Ethiopian Ministry of Education and Fine Arts is financing the digging of a rather expensive hole, an expensive hole, moreover, that doesn't ever seem likely to produce oil or, indeed, anything else but frustration?

Let us take a look at the products of this expensive hole. This hole exists, ostensibly, to prepare students for studying in English in grade 7. These four years are supposed to produce students capable of reading science, history, geography and maths textbooks in English, capable of understanding lessons often given by native speakers of English and Indians. What do grade 7 teachers tell us? At the December 1968 meeting of the English Teachers in Ethiopia Association we were told by two experienced seventh grade English teachers from two of the better schools in Addis Ababa that grade 7 students, in their experience, were incapable either of reading textbooks in English officially recommended for grade 7 or of understanding their teachers. We were told that students who have been taught English for four years are faced at the beginning of their seventh grade science text with words like 'hypothesis', 'environment', 'evidence' and 'research.' At the very beginning of the new, officially recommended grade 7 geography text, students come across a sentence like this :

"If we made a cut through the rocks, we would be able to see . . ."
This "if" construction, however, isn't taught until some way through the

grade 7 year, and it still has to be retaught in the university first-year English programme.

What is the solution? Answers vary: in-service training; detailed teacher's notes; workshops; radio; T.V. Aren't these just synonyms for hole-deepening and hole-improvement, remedies conceived of merely because this is the hole we're all obsessed with? To take one item, in-service training. Is really effective in-service training feasible? Lip-service is paid to the need for in-service training and impressive figures are published every year, to show that thousands of elementary school teachers have been "upgraded" (i.e. academically, from one grade to the next.) How effective is a 6-week course? The writer has had bitter experience of the regular Haile Sellassie I University Faculty of Education Summer School. Teachers coming back for their second or third summer frequently needed to be taken through the basic English Language skills again, right from the very beginning. A year in the provinces effectively removes most signs of a 6-week course, however intensive. Any workshop or longer course needs "follow-up" work if it is to have any lasting value, outside comforting official statistics, that is. If in-service training is to be really effective, then an enormous financial outlay is required, not to mention the need for properly qualified staff. If we look at the figures for elementary school teachers and if we remember that official Ministry policy, despite informed "expert" advice to the contrary, is that every elementary teacher is supposed to teach English (the 'self-contained classroom' philosophy), we will get an idea of how many so-called English teachers need to be reached, observed, re-trained, refreshed and "followed-up".

According to the 1966/67 figures, there were 1647 elementary schools and 9436 elementary school teachers. According to these same figures English was being taught in 4802 classrooms :

Grade 3	:	1612
Grade 4	:	1324
Grade 5	:	1065
Grade 6	:	811

TOTAL : 4802

The figures don't actually show how many of the 9436 elementary school teachers actually teach English in these 4802 classrooms. What we can safely deduce from these figures is that there are probably too many elementary school teachers teaching English for anything but a truly massive (and therefore extremely expensive) in-service scheme to be really effective. Since the figures for teachers don't show the high turnover rate in the profession, either, we don't know exactly how many new teachers would need to be trained from scratch every year. All we can say is that all in-service projects so far carried out or planned are merely scratching the surface. To return to our original metaphor, they are merely deepening the original hole. And this particular deepening doesn't seem to be improving the hole. At the same time, however, it's interesting to see that in 1966/67 there were 309 junior secondary schools, attached either to elementary or senior secondary schools, with 553 classroom units. Let us compare these figures again. In 1966-67 there were 4,802 grade 3, 4, 5 and 6 classrooms and 553 grade 7 classrooms. Even if we take the figure for grade 3 classrooms, 1,612, there is still a significant difference. Might it not be possible, with present resources, to mount a massive and intensive English-teaching course where it really matters — in the 309 junior secondary schools? Where it really matters

and where it might be more effective than the present wasteful and inefficient 4-year elementary English course.

The writer was even more convinced of the urgency of the need to decide to do something positive, perhaps even revolutionary, when he read recently of a proposed scheme for the expansion of the elementary school system. This is the joint Ethio-Swedish U.S. \$ 25.6 million scheme for a 5-year elementary school building programme, under which it is apparently planned to build 7,000 more elementary classrooms. While the writer is happy to see that more Ethiopian children will eventually be given the opportunity to go to school, he is appalled at the prospect of the elementary English-teaching hole being dug deeper at the same time : more so-called English-teachers to be helped, more children dropping out with 1, 2, 3 or 4 years' barely assimilated English and more students reaching grade 7 with a totally inadequate grasp of the English they need for grade 7 English-medium work.

The main purposes of this article are to suggest that the present policy of teaching English in the elementary grades is, in the main, mistaken, that the English-teaching that is done there is ineffective and wasteful anyway and that a postponement of English-teaching to grade 7 might be desirable. However, it would be evasive, even cowardly, not to suggest, briefly, how this new grade 7 English course might be organised and implemented. What follows can be only a tentative outline of an intensive course. Ideally, of course, such a project could only be tested in a pilot scheme but this would necessitate taking students out of elementary English classes for four years and then putting them through this intensive course and comparing their ability in English language with their contemporaries' command of English. This is hardly feasible.

At present we can estimate that a student in grade 3, 4, 5 or 6 has five English classes a week, i.e. five classes of about 45 minutes each. A normal school year probably consists of not more than 30 working weeks. This makes a total of 150 English classes spread out over the year, interrupted by vacations. The grade 3 to grade 6 course, then, consists normally of 600 English classes. Again we must remember that the children have a long vacation at the end of the school year and that when they return to school they have forgotten a lot of what they learnt in the previous year. So these 600 hours are spread over a long period and include, or should include, a great many revision or review periods. Everything else that goes on in grades 3 to 6 is in Amharic, of course, so that there is only one segment of English every day.

How many weeks would be required to cover the same amount of material intensively? If we assume that the average grade 7 week consists of between 35 and 40 periods and if we took every period for English, then, taking the lower figure of 35, we would need 17 weeks. 17 weeks is not a realistic figure, however, since neither students nor instructors would probably be capable of taking English non-stop for 17 weeks, though we must not forget that this is precisely what happens in grade 7 now. The subjects other than English aren't called English on the time-table, yet that is what they are in fact: English lessons, because the English needs to be taught before the ideas can be got across. Moreover, this intensive English course wouldn't consist of English entirely divorced from the other subjects, as is the case in the elementary schools. As soon as the students had mastered enough basic structures and vocabulary, the reading material would be about the other subjects they would soon be studying: social studies and general science for example, in simple English.

Who would teach this English? As at present, U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers, selected Indian teachers and selected Ethiopian teachers (University Service teachers and Junior Secondary Diploma teachers). Teachers who were not TESL 'specialists' would need an introductory course, but the numbers involved do not make this an insuperable logistic or financial problem. Material would need to be prepared to supplement the first four books of the **New Oxford English Course for Ethiopia**, since it's probable that these four books will be covered much more quickly in an intensive course than they are now. Incidentally, some work has already been done on this. The Ministry of Education Curriculum Division has already prepared and distributed an experimental four-week curriculum designed to help the grade 7 teachers of subjects other than English. This curriculum suggests ways and means in which every grade 7 teacher can help to teach English through his own subject. Perhaps radio could also help here, particularly in the teaching of auditory comprehension, the presentation of current affairs and the dramatisation of history, for example. TV could also be used, though its coverage is still far from adequate.

Are there any other advantages? In the first place classes are smaller in grade 7 than they are in the elementary grades. There are many grade 3 classes with more than 70 pupils. It is almost impossible to teach a language successfully to such large classes. Results show that the smaller the class, the more effective the language teaching is likely to be. Secondly, there will be much more carry-over from one class to the next. Since there won't be so much time to forget the English learnt in the previous lesson, there won't be the same need to spend so much time on revision/review. Thirdly, there will be less time in between English classes for students to revert to Amharic and so interfere with their newly-acquired English speech habits. Fourthly, at the moment numbers involved in dealing with elementary English make it almost impossible for the Ministry of Education to provide enough library books and/or sets of readers. The result is that students are learning skills (where they **are** learning them, that is) that they are unable to practise. In junior secondary schools, with a number of expatriate teachers and a reasonable supply of books (currently being ordered through an IDA loan), students will be able to listen to English, to speak it to a few native-speakers and to read books in English. In a sense they will be inundated with English. Inevitably, some will sink under the flood. Hopefully, many others will learn to swim and will survive.

Of necessity, the greater part of this article has been destructive, to try and make Ministry of Education officials, teachers and "experts" rethink the problem of elementary English. One tentative solution, as yet untried,⁵ has been put forward. All one can perhaps say in conclusion is that the situation could hardly be any worse than it is now and that therefore we might not do much harm if, to revert to Mr. de Bono's metaphor, all of us concerned with elementary school English decided to start digging a new hole.

5. However, at the recent East African Conference on Language and Linguistics, held in Dar-es-Salaam, December, 1968, Mr. R. H. Isaacs, of the Ministry of Education, Tanzania, presented a paper called: "'Learning through Language' — An intensive preparation course for pupils entering English-medium secondary schools from Swahili-medium primary schools in Tanzania". His paper describe the organization of a 6-week intensive course (46 hours a week, 276 hours in all) designed "to make the pupils feel at home in the English medium". The course was taught by teachers of all subjects and, as the writer says, was also regarded by the Tanzanian Ministry of Education "as a nation-wide practical in-service training course for the vast majority of teachers in Tanzania secondary schools". This Tanzanian course is being validated at the moment.