

"IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH" — A PILOT RADIO TEACHING PROGRAM

Preliminary Report

by Sydney W. Head

Most people would agree that radio broadcasting holds unique potentials for extending Ethiopia's conventional educational resources. "Improve Your English" was designed as a systematic small-scale effort to explore some of these potentials in actual practice. The program had to fit into the context of Radio Ethiopia's general Amharic Service. This meant that it could not be as sharply defined in terms of target audience and educational subject matter as would be expected in a formal radio course as such. Rather, the program had to have sufficiently broad appeal to offer at least some satisfaction to a relatively wide spectrum of listeners. The aim was to obtain a listener distribution over a rather flat normal curve, with a specific core of bona fide students at the center, but with substantial numbers of interested listeners deriving fringe satisfactions, extending into the tails of the curve both above and below the central group.

The Broadcasts

Starting September 21, 1968, Radio Ethiopia ran a series of promotional spot announcements on a new twice-weekly program to start on October 12 (Tekempt 2) under the title, "Improve Your English", scheduled Mondays and Saturdays, 7:45-7:59 a.m. Listeners were invited to send in stamped self-addressed envelopes in advance to obtain written study aids. The spot announcements were reinforced by an interview program with the Amharic-speaking member of the teaching team on October 11.

By September 30 over a hundred letters a day were coming in. At first about 90% of the respondents misunderstood the Amharic paraphrase of "stamped self-addressed envelope". They sent empty envelopes instead. In order to avoid discouragement at the outset, the mimeographed study aids were sent at the producer's expense to those who failed to supply stamps and/or envelopes. A re-written promotional spot, the aforementioned interview, and occasional clarifying announcements in the lesson-programs themselves soon corrected most of the misunderstandings, so that within two weeks about 90% of the letters contained properly self-addressed stamped envelopes as requested.

This preliminary report is written after ten lesson programs have been broadcast, after completion of the initial mailing of study aid materials, and after 27 programs have been recorded. The mailing consisted of two foolscap pages, each representing one of the nine "units" of material to be covered during the eight-month series. Three more mailings are planned. During the first mailing period, September 21-November 9, 1783 sets of study aids were sent out. Others were picked up in person. Evidence in some of the requesting letters indicates the

likelihood that many sets will be used by more than one person. Thus the "core audience", consisting of serious students using the study-aid materials, can be estimated at several times the number of mail-outs. In addition, word-of-mouth feedback suggests that the fringe audience in the tails of the distribution must be considerable. Several highly educated, mature Ethiopians have reported that the program-lessons make interesting listening, even apart from their specific teaching goals.

Return addresses and letters accompanying requests for study-aid materials indicate a high proportion of adult listeners from the Army and Police Force, and among employees of virtually every major government and semi-government agency, as well as from many private companies and from schools. Although the majority of requests came from Addis Ababa, at least some requests were received from each Governorate-General, as the following table indicates.

FIRST MAIL-OUT

Source by Governorate-General	Number of Requests
1. Shoa	1267
2. Hararge	96
3. Sidamo	55
4. Wollega	55
5. Kaffa	51
6. Gojjam	39
7. Wollo	30
8. Eritrea	27
9. Arussi	27
10. Illubabor	24
11. Begemdir	20
12. Tigre	16
13. Bale	11
14. Gemu-Goffa	3
Unidentified	62
Total	1783

The series is planned to run for 76 lessons, through June, 1969, in the following sequence, in which the term "Study Unit" refers to a single sheet of study aid material :

Mail-out Set	Study Unit	Program-Lessons	Broadcast Period
I	1	1-7	Oct. 12-Nov 2, 1968
	2	8-12	Nov. 4 — 18
II	3	13-18	Nov. 23-Dec. 9
	Review 1	19-24	Dec. 14 — 30
	4	25-30	Jan. 4 — 20, 1969
III	5	31-36	Jan. 25-Feb. 10
	6	37-42	Feb. 15-March 3
	Review 2	34-48	March 8-March 24
IV	7	49-54	March 29-April 14
	8	55-60	April 19-May 5
	9	61-66	May 10 — 26
	Review 3	67-76	May 31-June 30

Each unit consists first of a group of about 15 "basic sentences" which systematically introduce speech patterns; this is followed by a substitution exercise in which words or phrases are supplied for substitution in a blank left in the basic sentence patterns. A third component of most units is a reading practice section, usually in the form of a dialogue; other variable parts are introduced according to the needs of each study unit. The material of each unit fills one mimeographed foolscap sheet. The 12 sheets (nine units plus three reviews) will be mailed out in four installments.

Presentation of the lesson-programs on the air is guided by the mimeographed study aid material, presumed to be already in the student's hands. Each lesson-program covers approximately one of the main parts of a unit, with a whole unit requiring six programs for complete coverage.

In theory the intended level of instruction is approximately the sixth grade. However, it appears that the actual level of achievement in English at any given grade level varies widely in Ethiopia, and it is assumed that the material might be useful from grades five through twelve.

Participants in the program comprise: (1) an English language instructor; (2) an Amharic-speaking interpreter-commentator; (3) a studio pupil who is actually learning English at about the level of the radio lessons. Radio students are encouraged to regard the studio pupil as their surrogate, to repeat along with her, and sometimes to compete with her in word games. In addition to straightforward explanations, Amharic translation of new meanings, reading and repeating for pronunciation, making substitutions, answering questions, and changing roles in the dialogue exercises, the participants use devices intended to dramatize and to lend suspense. For example, for the unit on "Describing Things", the studio pupil was handed actual objects (an egg, a stone, a piece of cloth, etc.) and asked to describe them step by step (color, feel, shape, size, composition, use). The radio students were challenged to see how soon they could identify the objects.

History of the Project

The basic concept for this radio teaching project goes back about four years, to an unsuccessful effort to secure financial support for purchase of a special textbook to be supplied gratis to students in a pilot teaching program, and for administrative costs. Subsequently, a major publisher whose books are widely used in Ethiopian schools was approached with the suggestion that the publisher's texts be used as the basis for the program. It was proposed that, in return for the public relations benefits as well as the probable increased sale of books, the publisher would defray the administrative costs of the program. These would have involved duplicating the study aids, mailing them out at no cost to students, and keeping records of registration. Some interest was evinced, but in view of the unpredictability of the cost-ceiling, the publisher finally declined.

Despite the failure of these attempts to secure financial assistance, the writer felt that the critical moment had arrived to do something positive and practical about using radio in Ethiopia for teaching, even if only on an extremely limited basis. Since postage and clerical labor would be the major inescapable expense items, it was decided to minimize these by asking students to mail in stamped self-addressed envelopes to secure written study aids. This mail-in

device is novel in Ethiopia and it was not known what sort of response, if any, would be obtained.

It was estimated that by using the Radio station messengers, household servants, and whoever would donate time, it would be possible to mimeograph study aids, fold them, stuff envelopes, and mail them back — if the numbers did not exceed about two thousand. Accordingly, the level of instruction was deliberately fixed relatively high so as to limit the student potential.

It should be added that in any event the present schedule of only two programs per week, spaced awkwardly (Monday and Saturday), would be considered inadequate to sustain instruction at a much more elementary level. However, if financial support had been forthcoming, it would have been possible to obtain a more suitable schedule of broadcasts.

The Amharic-speaking interpreter-commentator and the student donate their time, and the English teacher is already employed as technical advisor to the EBS; hence participant costs are nil. The only cash outlay (other than for stamps and envelopes to respond to the initial letters which failed to enclosed stamped self-addressed envelopes) was for special mimeograph paper, which had to be of air-mail weight. Radio Ethiopia purchased 50 reams.

Such Spartan limitations on funds meant that a number of compromises had to be made in order to keep the project within the bounds of feasibility. Had money been available, it would have been preferable to :

1. Supply a separate sheet of study-aid material for each one or two lessons, rather than one sheet for every six lessons.
2. Print rather than mimeograph the study aids.
3. Mail out the study aids at no cost to students to eliminate even this small financial burden.
4. Aim at a lower grade-level and thus reach a much wider student audience.
5. Build in a research component to measure the effectiveness of radio teaching.
6. Schedule the program more frequently, a minimum of three times per week, with consequent increase in study-aid materials and preparation time.
7. Establish liaison with employee associations, private societies, and other possible sources of group audiences, and supply study-aid materials to them on a group basis.
8. Pre-test the study-aid materials on a "live" group of students.
9. Include a mail-in test component.

Some Technical Aspects

Since the aim of the project was to learn from experience about the practical problems of designing, producing, and "marketing" educational radio programs to the general Ethiopian radio audience, a record of the technical aspects of the undertaking may be of interest.

A standard open and close was dubbed to tape cartridges so as to minimize the recording time of the lessons themselves. These open and close announcements will be revised and re-recorded several times in the course of the whole series. In the first version, the open-close sequence occupied two minutes, leav-

ing 12 minutes for the program-lesson. An automatic timer-clock was used in the studio, connected to a bell and timed to ring after 11 minutes. This signalled the end of the "class" and left one minute for making an assignment for next time.

It was found that three program-lessons could be conveniently recorded in a one-hour session. More than three programs could have been recorded at one session, but was felt that fatigue might lessen spontaneity if more than three were recorded at one time, the more so because recording sessions had to be scheduled after regular working hours, by which time all concerned had already put in a full day. The basic outline of the content for each lesson is controlled by the lesson plans already sent out to the students. Certain additional material may be written out in advance — Amharic translations of key material for example. Otherwise, the actual dialogue is extemporized. The studio pupil receives the study materials in advance, as do the radio students, but is not rehearsed or primed except to be told in a general way what the lesson is to be about. This approach results, of course, in occasional lapses and errors, but these are felt to be tolerable for the sake of spontaneity. The two adults monitor each other and do not hesitate to correct each other's mistakes or oversights on the air.

At the rate of three lesson-programs per recording session of one hour, two recording sessions were scheduled per week. This schedule meant that recordings were soon being made several months in advance of broadcast. This off-set had the disadvantage that programs could not incorporate current administrative announcements or other incidental material of a timely nature. It would be desirable to reserve one minute of each program for current administrative announcements, to be recorded shortly before broadcast and inserted into the previously recorded material.

Tentative Conclusions

As pointed out earlier, "Improve Your English" is not to be construed as a formal "course". The word "improve" in the title was chosen to make this point explicit. Hopefully the program will help those who already know some English, but it does not presume to be an independent, self-contained course in English. Nevertheless, it was thought that the project could provide useful experience and insights of practical value, both to those concerned with the uses of radio broadcasting in formal education, and to those concerned with the "educational" content of the general service of Radio Ethiopia. For this reason the program was built around several **a priori** assumptions about how best to make teaching by radio in Ethiopia effective. These are called assumptions rather than hypotheses because it was not possible to subject them to rigorous tests. The best we can say is that feedback in the form of requests for study aids, letters, and word-of-mouth comments provides tentative evidence on which to judge the validity of the preliminary assumptions.

In summary, it was assumed that the effectiveness of English language teaching by radio in the general service of Radio Ethiopia would probably be enhanced by the use of :

- (A) Written lesson material, placed in the hands of listeners, to reinforce the aural content of the broadcasts;
- (B) An English vocabulary relatively free of references to artifacts and concepts alien to the common experience of rural Ethiopians;

- (C) A "studio pupil" as a program participant to function as a surrogate for radio students;
- (D) An English teacher with a working knowledge of Amharic;
- (E) An informal teaching style, with elements of spontaneity, humor, and play;
- (F) A good deal of Amharic explanatory material even to the extent of sacrificing the "direct method".

(A) **Written materials.** Accumulated experience and research have long since demonstrated the crucial importance of "utilization" support at the receiving end of educational broadcasts. But the practical problems of providing such support, especially under conditions encountered in developing countries, often tempts broadcasters to ignore the obvious. The study aids used in "Improve Your English" represent an estimate of the probable minimum level of utilization support required in the given situation.

(B) **Vocabulary.** Much material for teaching English as a foreign language prepared in Britain and the U.S. appears to assume that the student is about to leave his native land for London or New York and therefore needs above all else to know how to get around in a Western megalopolis. Happily this is not true of the New Oxford English Course now used in the Ethiopian lower grades. The fact is that the average rural child in Ethiopia is unlikely ever to have to contend with either subways or tubes. Excessive use of the names of artifacts — and of social and interpersonal concepts — alien to his culture simply makes the foreign language doubly foreign. Therefore "Improve Your English" attempts to limit its basic vocabulary to objects and concepts likely to be familiar in everyday Ethiopian rural life. At the same time, in order to capitalize on growing curiosity about the rest of the world, a carefully controlled amount of foreign material is introduced and explained. For example, in a unit on "Family Relations", the European method of using patronymics is compared with the Ethiopian method. Student letters single out the "usefulness" of the vocabulary as one of the praiseworthy aspects of the program.

(C) It was assumed that an actual pupil, participating unrehearsed, would provide several benefits — giving listeners someone to identify with, giving the teacher insights into problems likely to be encountered by the unseen radio students, and contributing mild elements of dramatic suspense, humor, and fun. It has been found that this device does in fact stimulate interest in, and talk about, the program. School children discuss the boners the studio pupil makes and how the Amharic-speaking member of the teaching team scolds her. In particular it appears that the use of the studio pupil adds a dimension of "listenability" which helps attract what appears to be a considerable following of mature, non-student listeners.

(D) **Teacher's Knowledge of Amharic.** Although no particular evidence supports the belief other than personal experience, it is felt that the assumption that a basic knowledge of Amharic would be helpful to the English teacher has proved valid. It undoubtedly saves time in preparing and recording programs. It has also proved useful when Amharic translations needed refinement or supplementary explanation. It is felt, too, that there may be psychological benefits in terms of teacher-listener relations. The listeners are likely to respond more warmly if they feel the English teacher has gone to some trouble to try to learn their language, and to derive some comfort from the fact that he obviously has his problems of language learning, too.

(E) **Informal Teaching Style.** Some misgivings were felt at the outset that the contrast between the informal style of the program and the traditional Ethiopian classroom atmosphere might be misunderstood and even resented. No evidence of adverse reactions on this score have so far emerged. On the contrary, a number of commentators have spoken favorably about this aspect of the program.

(F) **Use of Amharic.** It is impracticable to use the "direct method" without the continuity and reinforcement of daily broadcasts. Moreover, since the program is scheduled in the Amharic general service of Radio Ethiopia, good radio practice requires that it be generally intelligible to Amharic-speaking listeners who do not know any English. Again, this is a compromise imposed by the needs of a general broadcasting service. A service designed specifically for educational broadcasting would not be subject to these constraints.

To avoid the stiffness of formal translation, the producers have tried to develop what they call the "tennis-match" technique, whereby Amharic key words are at times softly interpolated, almost as asides to the listeners, so as not to interrupt the flow of English dialogue between the teacher and the studio pupil.

Results at this early stage of the project appear to support the validity of the preliminary assumptions. At a later stage, it is planned to send out a questionnaire along with the study aid materials in order to obtain more detailed, quantifiable listener reactions.