

WHY NOT TO ABANDON ENGLISH TEACHING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL?

Simon Murison-Bowie and Adi Huka

In his paper *Why Not Abandon English Teaching in the Elementary School?* Mr. Rogers admits that he is putting forward an extreme point of view. Mr. Rogers also admits that it is unlikely that any notice will be taken of his suggestion: we should perhaps let it go without comment. We feel, however, that there are a number of assumptions made about the situation of elementary school English in Ethiopia that need to be looked at a little more closely.

1. Elementary English as a preparation for junior secondary school.

'English is presumably taught from grade 3 to grade 6 to prepare students for the beginning of English-medium teaching in grade 7.' In saying this we believe Mr. Rogers to be making an incomplete assumption as to the role of English in the elementary school. We shall discuss it under the headings:-

a) educational aims at the elementary level — All teaching in the elementary school can certainly be seen as a preparation for teaching in the secondary school. At the same time all teaching in the elementary school is of intrinsic value in that it provides basic knowledge and the means of increasing this knowledge. If this is not true, then according to Mr. Rogers' thesis we may as well abandon all subjects at the elementary level because the number of dropouts is the same for each subject. Or has English some specific characteristics that make it of no intrinsic value, these seen in honest comparison with those characteristics of other subjects considered to have intrinsic value, and which therefore disqualify it from the elementary curriculum? The only characteristic that might suggest this that we can think of, and which is mentioned in Mr. Rogers' paper, is the peculiar difficulty of teaching of languages. For reasons which will become apparent we believe this to be inadequate grounds for disqualification;

b) effectiveness of elementary English as a preparation for English-medium teaching — It cannot be denied that four years of often poorly taught English is insufficient preparation for the use of the language as the medium of instruction. Whether English has been taught at the elementary level or not, some form of special treatment of the language is necessary at the first year junior secondary level. This is realized by the English Textbook and Curriculum Committee of the Ministry of Education and a directive on this is about to be distributed to a selection of junior secondary schools. Whether this special treatment should be in the form of an intensive course as Mr. Rogers suggests, or in the form of a more protracted and other-subject oriented programme, could well provide the topic for a separate discussion. We would only like to point out that intensive

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courses have only been proved to work with highly motivated students of above-average intelligence. The books of the **New Oxford English Course** for grades 6, 7 and 8 are being planned with these problems in mind; the number of other-subject textbooks in which the language is controlled is also increasing. We feel strongly that any English learnt in the elementary grade — if it is only the alphabet — will contribute to the usefulness and effectiveness of the special treatment that is seen as necessary.

2. The grade 6 dropout

Before making any decisions concerning the future of English in the elementary school we need to know more about

a) the reasons for the high dropout —

- i. Intelligence — As the pass mark for the grade 6 examination is adjusted from year to year to ensure a percentile pass, intelligence is at best a variable factor in gaining entrance to the junior secondary school.
- ii. finance — Parents' willingness to continue to support their children at school must depend on the dual effect of having to pay for uniforms, exercise books, book rentals, etc. and of losing a potential worker from the family.
- iii. availability of junior secondary schools — For what percentage of grade 6 graduates is there a junior secondary school near enough to permit attendance? And where there are schools, what percentage of potential pupils can find a place?

b) the future of the grade 6 dropout — Mr. Rogers implies that the only jobs available to the grade 6 dropouts are shoe-shining and car-watching. In reality, of course, he may become a clerk, a policeman, a customs official, a shop-keeper, a bus-driver, etc.

c) the use that might be made of English by the grade 6 dropout — Mr. Rogers asks whether it is fair to teach English to so many 'planned' dropouts and by so doing 'to give them the idea that they will all be going on to junior secondary school'. One may query

- i. the implication that it is only English that exerts this impliedly evil influence of motivation, and
- ii. the assumption that all pupils naively suppose that they will continue their education.

The dual function of elementary education has already been discussed and it is clear, in Addis Ababa, at any rate, that large numbers of people use 'their pathetic scraps of English' to their financial gain. There is subjective evidence that they have taken advantage of what they learnt and have taught themselves more. The popularity of evening classes, attended to achieve up-grading, further supports this.

3. Effects of abandoning English at the elementary level.

a) on elementary school pupils — Those pupils that drop out for reasons other than inability would be deprived of four years' contact with the

language and would thereby be cut off from the opportunities attendant upon even a slight knowledge of the language. Those pupils for whom the decision to continue at the junior secondary school is not clear-cut would be put off by the knowledge that they would have to work that much harder to achieve some proficiency in English. The effect on those pupils who continue to the junior secondary level has already been mentioned in 1. b). Without even a minimal knowledge of the language the pupils would be at that much more of a disadvantage and would reflect even more acutely what is at present being deplored — an ignorance of English at the end of the elementary school;

b) on elementary school teachers — The low status of the elementary school teachers is widely deplored and the effect of this on the Ethiopian educational system as a whole has been clearly stated by Dr. Aklilu Habte.¹ A withdrawal from the teacher of a responsibility to teach English could only further lower his status. It would also isolate him from the influence of the language and prejudice his chances of furthering his own education and his career. The appearance of Mr. Rogers' paper at this time, when many teachers are beginning to feel a new professional interest in the teaching of English and a confidence in the first two books of the **New Oxford English Course**, is seen to be particularly unfortunate;

c) on the difference between elementary and secondary school — The exclusion of English from the elementary school would emphasize the difference between the two levels, would decrease the prestige of an elementary education and have the adverse effect on the secondary school intake mentioned above. It is salutary to remember that only about 8.5% of the total potential elementary school population is in fact enrolled. Any lessening of the coverage of elementary education would be to deprive this small percentage of the opportunity to make every use of their privileged position.

4. Conclusions

The following conclusions are arrived at in the full realization of the usefulness of having new ideas (lateral thinking) but in the firm belief that the having of new ideas is in no way contradictory to the logical thinking out of any ideas already had (vertical thinking). They are also made with the feeling that a 5-year-deep hole, in the context of educational development, cannot be more than a scratch on the surface and it is too soon to say whether or not we are digging in the wrong place.

The provision of textbooks suitable for the teaching of English in Ethiopian elementary schools is seen as an extremely important aspect of the problem — and one in which Mr. Rogers' contribution to date has been as great as anybody's. So far, however, only the first two years' books are in use; it is hoped that the book for grade 5 will be available in time for the academic year 1970-71. Thus it can be seen that it is extremely premature to judge the efficiency of a system that, far from having been functioning long enough to be judged, is only in its very earliest stages of development. Undoubtedly assessment of the system must be made and adjustments to it will be necessary.

The adoption of some form of special attention to English at the junior secondary level is likely soon to be made and ways of improving the linguistic

¹ Aklilu Habte: 'Brain drain in the elementary school', in the *Ethiopian Journal of Education*, Faculty of Education, Haile Sellassie I University. Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1967), pp. 27 - 39.

and professional abilities of the teacher are continually being discussed. It seems that some kind of compromise between the apparently conflicting ideals of the self-contained classroom and the specialist English teacher can be worked out. A scheme for the central training of limited numbers of specialist teachers who are then given the responsibility of advising and training other teachers in a given area (a cross between item VII on Mr. Rogers' list and the famous Madras 'Snowball' teacher training scheme) appears worthy of further research; the work of the Peace Corps elementary school supervisors is already directed along these lines. There is without doubt a long way to go before Ethiopia has a teacher training programme which produces satisfactory English teachers and adequate teaching materials and the Ministry of Education still has to be persuaded of the necessity for the former. But to condemn the practicability of starting the drilling just at the moment when the rig has been completed we think to be extravagant advice.