The Objectives and Content of the Ethiopian School English Syllabus: Its Adequacy, Relevence and Effectiveness

Marew Zewdie*

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A Language syllabus is an educational document; in fact, it is a record of commitments and accountability. It directs progress and indicates destination. To serve these purposes, it needs to be adequate (complete) in containing the requirements as a guide for the teaching-learning process, relevant (suitable) to the situation it intends to serve, and effective (yeilding) in producing expected learning outcomes. How is the Ethiopian School English Syllabus in the light of these issues: Adequacy, Relevance and effectiveness? This three-part study starts with a background survey of the design and use of language syllabuses, followed by a view on the Ethiopian School English Syllabus (ESES), and concludes with some suggestions. It is felt that this type of study will be very helpful, particularly, at a time when the Ethiopian School Curriculum in general and the language syllabus in particular are under scrutiny.

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1. Clearing the Ground

A discussion on the designing of a language syllabus and its uses involves, in one way or another, issues related to curriculum development. On such occasions, some people use one for the other; a syllabus for a curriculum. Experts in language teaching and learning (Corder, 1975; Wilkins, 1981; Widdowson, 1983; Stern, 1983; Yalden, 1983; White, 1988; Richards, 1990) share the view that a curriculum indicates an overall educational - cultural philosophy which applies across subjects, provides a broad description of general goals and thereby deals with the totality of a content to be taught in schools or educational systems. A syllabus, on the other hand, translates the philosophy of the curriculum into a more detailed and operational statement of teaching and learning for each subject. It sometimes provides more narrowly defined objectives at each level of learning. Although this hierarchical distinction places a syllabus in a subordinate position to a curriculum, it has to be borne in mind that curriculum and syllabus complement each other and never show any conflict.

With regard to the process of designing a curriculum or a syllabus, a planner for the former progresses systematically from a needs assessment, to goals and objectives, to a specification of the instructional content of the programme while the procedures for developing a syllabus involve an analysis of instructional objectives and their arrangement by priorities, and then determining the kind of content required to attain objectives.

The deliberation as to which components of a language syllabus (objectives, content, methodology, evaluation) should be dealt with in-depth in the design is an unresolved matter. Stern (1984) reviewing the work of a well known symposium on General English Syllabus, noted that the participants (the gurus in the field) held the view that a syllabus is mainly concerned with the objectives, content and sequencing of content. He then underscored that these experts differed on what a syllabus should include in addition to these components. For instance, among the participants, Widdowson and Brumfit felt that methodology is not part of the syllabus concept while Gandlin and Breen objected to the idea of a fixed plan and preferred a wider definition which, besides content and objectives includes learning experience and evaluation. For Shaw (1977) evaluation is not part of the syllabus concept. In the absence of a consensus on this issue, the author of this paper, for now, preferred to deal with the two main components of a syllabus: objectives and content.

Before ending this section, it seems necessary to briefly review the three major factors essential in the design of a language syllabus, that is, theoretical underpinnings, students' needs and constraints of the route (implementation stage).

The theoretical underpinnings deal with the linguistic description and the language learning theory a certain syllabus reflects. The former is about content specification while the latter deals with how well the specified content is organized to promote efficient learning. The Structural Syllabus, for instance, contains inventories of forms and

patterns of a language and advocates unremitting practice of the list of forms and patterns of a language aimed at building up language learning habits on the basis of stimulus-response chains.

With regard to the Communicative Syllabus, the content specification is mainly based on systematically identified needs of students. Consequently, the more frequent and useful semantic and functional learning units identified through students' needs analysis, would be specified prior to less frequent and less useful ones. It, however, inheres structural disorganization (Furey 1983), and uses any appropriate system of organization suitable for the learner.

In the light of these practices, the adoption and use of a certain syllabus does not seems to be an easy choice. To ease the problem of choice, the communicative syllabus is designed to have eight variants (Table II) which include structure, function, and notion combined in varied ways and presented in differeing sequences. However, the choice, inter alia, must take into account students' communicative needs and the constraints of the route.

The assumption in the identification of students' communicative needs is that it provides facts on which the learning units can be based. Communicative needs of students, according to Widdowson (1981), can be interpreted as a goal oriented and process-oriented approach. The former is related to terminal behaviour, the end of learning, while the latter deals with transitional behaviour. Questionnaires and interviews can be used to identify these needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987), however, advise syllabus

designers to make a balanced consideration of the two approaches and warn that it is naive to base a syllabus simply on student needs without taking into account the constraints of the route.

A prior assessment of the constraints in a certain educational setting involves a thorough understanding of the cultural, educational organizational, learner, teacher and material factors of that situation. These factors must be "negotiated and transformed" (Allen and Spoda, 1983) in the syllabus to ensure successful implementation of it. Rodgers (1983) noted that failures in syllabus implementation result not so much from stubborn resistance or bad intentions of authorities but rather from failure to recognize ingrained and complex relationships found in any educational setting.

I.I. The Design of Objectives in Language Teaching

Some confusion exists over the distinction between goals, purposes, aims, and objectives. Some educators (Dressel, 1976; Davies, 1976; Romiszowski, 1981; Dubin and Olshtain, 1986) hold the view that educational goals, purposes and aims are fairly general statements of intent usually interpreted at broad levels while objectives are specific activities which learners do to demonstrate their mastery of certain issues. In short, aims are broad, comprehensive and time consuming while objectives are tailord tasks carried out day by day to attain outlined aims.

But how far can objectives of a language teaching syllabus be specific in terms of the degree of skills that are expected of the learner. How well can one learn a certain skill? There are no clear cut answers to each questions. Some experts like Valette and Disick, (1972); Steiner, (1975) prefer highly specific objectives while others (Van EK 1980, Widdowson, (1983) oppose this (see Abebe, 1986 for details). The former believe that highly specified objectives can help educators to observe and measure language skills in absolute terms while the latter argue that it is difficult to state objectives in an absolute sense since language use is neither fully predictable (except perhaps in the most restricted situations) nor describable. In fact, they stress the claim that increased specification leads to increased restriction of language competence. What a designer can do is design objectives using action verbs and characterize the content with terms such as "reasonable", "sufficient", "frequent", "close" and so on, rather than defining them in absolute terms.

In an attempt to co-ordinate and classify concepts for the designing of objectives, Bloom et. al. (1956) suggested three categories of domains, namely, the cognitive domain (knowledge and intellectual skills), the affective domain (feelings and attitudes), and the psychomotor domain (physical skills). However they did not fully develop the taxonomy for the psychomotor domain as they did for the other two.

The categorization of Bloom et. al. was later adopted in language teaching. Among language teaching specialists, Valette was the first to use such a

taxonomy. Some years later, Valette and Disick suggested a taxonomy of language teaching objectives which was influenced by the then prevailing structuralism whose first priority was the study of the structure of a language.

In Europe, where the communicative approach was in vogue in the 1970's the Council of Europe Threshold Level Project attempted to specify language learning objectives in operational terms. The Council team on designing a unit/credit system for the teaching of modern languages in Europe felt that "Learning objectives must be geared towards learners' needs. This means that before defining an objective we must define the group of learners whose needs we wish to cater for, the target group" (Van EK and Alexander, 1982, p.7).

The developments in the designing of objectives outlined above are mainly the results of changes on what objectives should primarily focus in line with the prevailing language description and language learning theories. No matter what these objectives focus on, specialists in language teaching believe that "Without a clear statement of objectives, questions of content, methodology and evaluation cannot be systematically addressed" (Richards, 1990, p.8).

One possible approach to stating objectives clearly is to be cautious about the pitfalls in the writing of objectives. According to Davies, objectives become obscure and ineffective when they:

1. Refer to what the instructor is going to do, not the trainees.

2. Refer to aspects of the teaching strategy, not to what trainees will be able to do.

3. Sound impressive but mean little. Sometimes objectives are written with such high sounding words that it is easy to be impressed.

4. Fail to identify performance in clear enough terms. This happens when the action verb is ambiguous and the content is badly defined. (1981, p. 139).

Objectives, according to Davies (1983), are guides to learning, instruction and evaluation. As a result, all necessary precaution must be taken to state them clearly and exactly in simple terms.

1.2 Selection and Organization of Content in Language Teaching

As stated earlier, the content of a syllabus comprises the subject matter to be taught in a course. It is mostly detemined by the theoretical views held about the nature of language and language learning at a particular period. For instance, in Structural Linguistics, the content of syllabuses was mainly the structure of a language: its phonology, lexis and grammar. In the selection and organization of content, the structuralist used "simplicity, frequency, contrastive difficulty, social utility, pedagogic utility and teaching of the familiar before the unfamiliar" (Wilkins, 1976, pp. 6-7). This approach follows a teaching stragegy which Wilkins calls "synthetic". In such a strategy, the language

to be taught is broken into lists of grammatical terms which later are fed to the learner in its pre-determined order. It is assumed that the learner will pull all the pieces back together again to make a whole.

On the other hand, in an analytic teaching strategy, the language to be taught is not broken down into structural building blocks. In other words, the structural considerations are secondary. "They are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning the language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes" (Wilkins, 1976, p. 13).

When Transformational Generative Grammar(TG) came into the scene, it did not bring any major changes in the selection and organization of content in language teaching. It, of course, considered taxonomic classification inadequate and advocated the classification of content to be based on the rules of the grammar of a language. According to Brumfit and Johnson, "what Transformational Generative Grammar offered is alternative strategies for teaching grammar - new ways of teaching the same thing" (1979, p.3). In both Stractural Linguistics and Transformational Generative Grammar, the selection and organization of content gave little or no consideration to use of language and meaning.

This latter view is much associated with the teaching of language for Communicative purposes which followed the developments of TG. In the teaching of language for Communicative purposes, the selection and organization of content of language is based mainly on the needs of students. Consequently, the

task here is first to identify the notions/ functions which students need to express through the target language, and second, to set out to describe them in some detail.

A considerable advance in this respect was achieved by Wilkins (1976) who proposed a notional/functional syllabus. In this type of syllabus, the selection and organization of content is based on the following categories: (1) Semantico-grammatical notions: concerned with 'time', 'space', 'quality', 'matter', 'deixis' (2) Modal meanings, which express the notions of 'modality', 'certainty', 'commitment' through the use of modal verbs, conditional tense, etc. (3) communative function which deals with what speakers do with language.

Wilkins (1979) believes that the set of categories outlined above provides us with a language for describing the communicative needs of different sets of learners, whether their goal is a generalized or specialized ability to use the language.

In conclusion, it has to be noted that some of the draw backs of the principles of Structural Linguistics and Transformational Generative Grammar cited above do not lead to the conclusion that the approaches have not contributed anything to improve the teaching and learning of languages. On the contrary, they have advanced the assumptions underlying language teaching and learning many steps ahead. For instance, it was during the heyday of Structure Linguistics that the primacy of speech in language learning was recognized. It was the written form that was emphasized before the advent of Structural Linguistics. The distinction

made by Chomsky (1957) between linguistic competence and performance was one of the many important contributions of TG. The former covers the unconscious knowledge of the ideal speaker - listener in a completely homogeneous speech community while the latter is about the actual use of language in a concrete situation. This view, according to White (1988) helped to consider language as a human phenomenon and made man's capacity for language learning unique and innate.

Having looked into the ways the main components of a language syllabus (objectives and content) are handled through time, we now move to a survey of the features of the three main syllabuses which have dominated the development of the teaching of English for the last five decades. These syllabuses, according to Wilkins (1979), are the grammatical syllabus, the situational syllabus, and the notional/functional syllabus. To spare time and space, the main features of these syllabuses are outlined in the following (Table I).

Table I A Summary of the Features of a Grammatical, Situational and Notional/Functional Syllabuses

Focuses	Grammatical Syllabus (GS)	Situational Syllabus (SS)	Notional/Functional Syllabus (NFS)
1. Main Issue	How do speakers of a certain language express themselves?	When and Where will the learners need the language to express themselves?	What do users of the language need to express themselves?
2. Views on Language	Gives primacy to language structure; reflects the thinking of structural linguistics.	Assumes language is related to situational contexts in which it occurs.	Assumes language as a a system of meaning rather than form.
3. Views on language learning	Learning a language consists of learning the language system. Form——→Meaning Use	Assumes language learning implies becoming proficient in using the language in a social situation. Form←——Meaning Use	Assumes learning a language consists of learning how to mean and learning the rules of use. Form←——Meaning Use

At present it is the Notional/Functional (Communicative) syllabus which is widely used in many institutions of education. As stated earlier, it is the needs of the learner that is the crucial issue in this syllabus. Roberts asserts that this syllabus takes:

> Communicative needs as the basis for any syllabus aiming at communicative competence, and departs radically from the traditional grammatical approach by working from these needs through to the linguistic forms which have to be learnt if the needs are to be fulfilled rather than starting with a repertoire of linguistic forms which learners may later on 'fill' with meanings.(1982, p. 98)

The question now is on how to handle the linguistic aspects in designing a communicative syllabus. How should it be introduced and organized? Questions such as these seem to lead to the design of variants of communicative syllabus. Yalden (1983) outlines eight variants of this syllabus as summarized below:

Focuses	Grammatical Syllabus (GS)	Situational Syllabus (SS)	Notional/Functional Syllabus (NFS)
4. Views on selecting and sequencing language items	Structural patterns are selected and sequenced on the basis of complexity difficulty, regularity, utility and frequency.	Predicts situations and makes them a basis for selecting and presenting language content.	The organization of language items is done on the basis of what language items the learner needs to know in order to get something done through the language.
5. Some Constraints	It fails to bring about an understanding of how language functions to convey meaning and to meet communicative needs.	Difficult to define exactly what is meant by situation.	The specification of needs may turn out to be global.
	Its sequencing or grading prevents students from using similar structures which would come later in the sequence.	Difficult to exhaustively list and map interrelationship of situations.	Lacks a principled means of ordering syllabus content.
	There is a problem of deciding the level of conceptual difficulties	Does not provide clearly defined criteria for sequencing of teaching points.	Lacks principled critieria for selecting functions and for determining what a function consists of

Table II A Summary of the Types of Communicative Syllabuses

1 Structural-functional	2 Variable focus	3 Proportional	4 Functional
-linguistic forms followed by language functions	-emphasis shifts in turn from formal features of language to discourse features to instrumental use of language	-starts with linguistic forms; later the linguistic forms are de-emphasised, functions and discourse skills are given prominence	objectives in communicative functions not in terms of linguistic items

5 Fully Communicative	6 Procedural	7 Structures & functions	8 Fully notional
-learner-centred, -takes minimal input -methodology, teacher preparation and learner autonomy are important	-no linguistic specification -has a series of tasks in the form of problem solving	-a structure progression in a communicative framework	-socio-cultural semantic, linguistic as well as psycho-pedagogical braided together

2. The Ethiopian School English Syllabus (ESES)

The designing of a curriculum/syllabus in Ethiopian schools appeared with the development of modern education in the first part of the 20th Century. According to Tesfaye and Taylor, "The earliest existing book-form curriculum is that for 1947/8 --- which reads as though there were no previous such documents" (1976, p. 381). Since then, different types of curriculums/ syllabuses, mostly comprehensive in their objectives and content, have been developed by the Ministry of Education. In 1984, the Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Education brought out The Ethiopian School Syllabuses (mimeo). This material is different from the previous ones in that it extensively covers the objectives, content, and expected learning outcomes of all subjects (22 in number) offered at all levels of Ethiopian schools. The work as a whole is a substential input to the educational system of Ethiopia.

2.1 The Objectives in the ESES

The objectives, content, and expected learning outcomes of the teaching of English in elementary (Level 3-6), junior secondary (Level 7-8) and senior secondary schools (Level 9-12) run from pages 158 to 193. The following are the objectives for the teaching of English at each level.

A. Level 3-6

The students will be able to:

-Recognize and reproduce English vowel

and consonant sounds and their combinations and by so doing gain auditory facility.

-Acquire a foundation vocabulary.

-Express their ideas in simple sentence during academic discourse.

-Use the English language for individual reading and writing pruposes.

-Develop proficiency in the language so as to use it as a medium of instruction later on (1984, p. 158).

B. Level 7-8

The students will be able to:

-develop the ability to listen to spoken English within the prescribed level of accuracy so as to grasp, read and reproduce ideas.

-Develop the ability to speak English fluently within a limited vocabulary and with the most useful sentence patterns so as to communicate with other people and express their ideas.

-Develop the ability to read written English within the prescribed level of comprehension and speed so as to identify main ideas, understand details, see relationships and think critically.

-Develop the ability to write English within the prescribed level of clarity so as to help them to record and transmit the basic elements of human knowledge and experience.

-Reinforce and speed up the acquistion of a back-ground for the senior secondary programme and

-Upon completion of school education those who wish to pursue further education can do so confidently with an adequate competency. (1984, p. 173-74).

C. Level 9-12

The students will be able to:

-Understand and grasp whatever knowledge and skills are transmitted to them in English.

-Increase reading speed along with a high level of skills.

-Communicate with other people (mainly in academic situations) expressing their ideas fluently and accurately using appropriate words and effective sentence constructions.

-Pursue advanced fields of study using the English Language as a medium of instruction. (1984, p. 1819)

In what follows, the shortcomings of the objectives above are assessed.

Firstly, it is clear that the statement of the above objectives contain some elements of what are called 'essential ingredients in syllabus design': they are at least expressed in 'what students do' and not in 'what teachers are going to do (see page 6). Nevertheless, to start with, nowhere is the rationale (underlying principle) upon which these objectives are designed explicityly stated. In most instances, syllabus designers for the teaching of English as a second or foreign language often begin their work by assessing facts related to questions such as the following:

1. What do students need English for?
2. What levels of communicative ability are students expected to acquire at a certain grade or level?
3. What sort of texts will these levels of communicative ability require?

This type of fact finding enquiry helps to explain the purposees for the designing of a syllabus and to delimit more clearly the objectives and content of certain grades and levels. It also helps to show how systematically a syllabus is designed. Unfortunately there is no hint in the ESES whether the designers have thoroughly examined issues of those types. Apart from this, there are no explanations as to why:

a. the syllabus is heavily structure - based?
b. the designers preferred to give 'general

objectives' to each level and a list of grammar and lexical items for each grade?

From the nature of the objectives, it seems that the syllabus is designed to teach General English using the structural approach. According to Widdowson, "General English seeks to provide learners with a general capacity to enable them to cope with undefined eventualities in the future" (1983, p. 6). However, it is commented, "the General English which is provided in secondary schools has in most cases proved to be inadequate as a preparation for use which students are required to make of the language when they enter higher education (Allen and Widdowson 1979, p. 123). In fact, Ewer and Boys concluded, "General English Programmes have not been successful at the secondary level in the third world countries" (1981, p. 100). One of the causes for the limitations of the teaching of General English is its aim to cover the whole of the structure of English. Such an aim is highly unattainable because it is very difficult to map the whole of the structure of English exhaustively and for that matter few non-native learners will ever need the whole of the structure of the language to communicate.

With regard to a structural approach, many experts in language teaching and learning believe that it gives primacy to form rather than to language use. As a result, it fails to bring about an understanding of how language functions to convey meaning and to meet communicative needs of learners. Moreover, a structural approach, among others, is

allied with pattern practice which is criticized not only for being boring and repetitive but also for not leading to communicative use of patterns.

In contrast, experts in the field nowadays suggest the use of the principles of the communicative approach. This approach has proved to be effective, for instance, in the Arab World, Asia, Latin America and Africa. Although rigorous research is yet to be undertaken at all levels of education about the effectiveness of the communicative approach in Ethiopia, some studies carried out in the Institute of Language Studies Addis Ababa University (Hailom, 1982; Morris, 1983; Haile Michaeal, 1984) with regard to teaching and learning certain language uses indicate that better results were obtained by teaching students through the communicative approach.

Secondly, the focus of all the objectives in the three levels is on the teaching of the four macroskills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) although not grouped under each of the four language skills. Some experts like (Corder, 1975; Munby, 1978) argue that the customery division of language skills into the four skills is inadequate since it does not bring out the whole set of microskills which, in fact, are essential focuses in language teaching and learning.

For a better understanding of the nature of the objectives of the ESES, let us specifically examine the objectives which seem to be designed for the teaching of reading in each of the three levels.

1. Use the English language for individual read-

ing and writing pruposes. (Level 3-6)

2. Develop the ability to read written English within the prescribed level of comprehension and speed so as to indentify main ideas, understand details, see relationships and think critically. (Level 7-8)

3. Increase reading speed along with a high level of skills. (Level 9-12)

Each of these objectives is very broad and vague; it has little to say on whether reading is taught specifically, for instance, for skimming, scanning, for making use of reference systems, discourse markers etc. appropriate to each level. They need to be broken down into specific skills.

In what follows, the writer takes up the objectives for the teaching of reading in grades 9-12 (given above) and restates them into general objective (aim) and specific objectives in order to illustrate how they can be more meaningful and operational. As the restating of the general objective of the ESES is primarily aimed at breaking it down into specific language activities (tasks that students must do involving language), it does not intend to create an impression that the restated objectives are functional/notional. Nor does it assume that these objectives are based on the analysis of the communicative needs of students which this paper favours. The restating of these specific objectives follows the work of Munby (1978) and Hawkey (1980).

A. General Objective (aim) - grades 9-12

To read written texts in English appropriate

to their level and needs at a reasonable speed with ease and understanding.

B. Specific Objectives these are set of behavioual objectives which collectively map into the general objective given above.

1. Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items through

   1.1 Word formation: roots/stems, affixation, derivation, compounding.

   1.2 Contextual clues: lexical field/collocation, relation of synonymy, hyponymy, pro-forms/ general words.

2. Identifying relations within the sentence by assessing pre-modification, post-modification, negation, modal auxilaries complex compounding.

3. Identifying relations between parts of a text through

   3.1 lexical cohesion devices of synonymy, hyponymy, pro-forms.

   3.2 grammatical cohesion devices of reference (anaphoric and cataphoric), comparison, substitution, logical connectors.

4. Reading for information by

   4.1 identifying the topic (theme).
   4.2 identifying the main idea: stated and implied.
   4.3 distinguishing the main idea from supporting ideas.

4.4 distinguishing important from unimportant details.

4.5 Identifying indicators in a text for introducing an idea, concluding an idea, transition to another idea.

4.6 skimming to obtain the gist or general information of the semantic content.

4.7 scanning to locate specifically required information on a single point, more than one point, and a whole topic.

4.8 using basic reference skills: bibilographies, footnotes, table of contents and index.

5. Identifying the communicative function (value) of a text by examining:

5.1 its overall rhetorical purpose, eg. giving instructions, reporting an event etc.

5.2 its rhetorical structure including ways of initiating, developing and terminating a discourse.

6. Transcoding information from one medium to another.

7. Note making by:

7.1 extracting salient points for summary of specific idea/topic in the text.

7.2 selective extraction of relevant points from a text for summary especially involving the coordination of related information.

7.3 reducing atext through the rejection. of redundant or irrelevant information.

8. Reading a written text interpretatively by:

8.1 extracting information not explicitly stated: making inferences, using exophoric reference, 'reading between the lines', integrating data in the text with own experience or knowledge of the world.

8.2 interpreting the writers intention, attitude and bias.

8.3 making critical judgements.

These specific objectives, in one way or another, focus on:

1. getting the meaning strategies at the

a. word level (exploring internal and external context clues.

b. structure level (unravelling complex structures).

2. examining textual cohesion (devices for maintaining semantic continuity).

3. reading skills (extracting general and detailed information from a text).

4. indentifying communicative function (value) of text: its purpose and structure.

5. transferring information.

6. note making and interpretative skills.

What is more, the above specific objectives (1-8) for grades 9 to 12 are designed and organized with the assumption that:

(a) students tackle language activities involving higher order reading skills such as the critical skills of distinguishing between important and unimportant information, recognizing the differences between facts and opinions as they progress through their studies. Along with this, the quality and depth of these activities increase.

(b) the reading skill is mastered by actually performing tasks.

(c) this skill is never developed in isolation from other language skills.

Having outlined the new objectives of the ESES, it seems useful to touch upon how these objectives are to be realized methodologically in the classroom. According to Widdowson (1990), a syllabus is not only the specification of a teaching programme but also a pedagogic agenda. Consequently, the language activities outlined above are both statements of what is to be taught in the classroom and activities (tasks) to be integrated, cycled (introduced at one stage and recycled later) and carried out in the classroom. Moreover, it has to be noted that the communicative approach, which this paper advocates, emphasizes methodology; it is not simply a functional/notional approach.

Thirdly, although the statements of the objectives have behavioural aspects, these aspects are open

to many interpretations. The verbs used to indicate behavioural aspects express ambiguous ideas. According to Girma, "A great deal of muddled-thinking in education is due to the employment of vague concepts and language" (1975), p. 72). To have an understanding of the extent of the ambiguity of the idea that the verbs express in each of the objectives at each of the three levels, these verbs are provided figures (means taken from a study) (see Davis 1976, p. 93) which asked teachers to award a score ranging from "1" (clearly observable action; eg. draw a line) to "5" (clearly unobservable action; eg. understand). Here are the verbs with these figures:

Table III Degree of Ambiguity of verbs used to Express Behavioural Objectives in the Ethiopian School English Syllabus

Levels	Objectives	Verbs used	Means
3-6	1	to recognize and reproduce*	4.5
	2	to acquire** (to know)	4.9
	3	to express** (to say)	1.2
	4	to Use	2.9
	5	to develop	4.3
7.8	1	to develop	4.3
	2	to develop	4.3
	3	to develop	4.3
	4	to develop	4.3
	5	to reinforce and speed up*	-
	6	to pursue*	-
9-12	1	to understand and grasp*	5
	2	to increase*	-
	3	to communicate**(Say)	1.2
	4	Pursue*	

*verbs not avialable in the list of the study.

** verbs not available in the list of the study but are synonymous to the verbs in the brackets.

According to the table above, most of the verbs used in the ESES have a mean of 4.3 and above. This indicates that the verbs used denote behaviours which are vague to translate into action. If, however, we look into the restated objectives given on pages (17-19), the necessary precaution has been taken to avoid the use of nebulous verbs. It has specified the objectives as skill rather than knowledge and reduced them to a manageable degree of specificity.

Fourthly, the content expressed in each of the objectives (ESES) seems high-sounding and obscure. For instance, consider:

a. acquire a foundation vocabulary. (Level 3-6)

b. ...speak English fluently within a limited vocabulary ... (Level 7-8)

c. understand and grasp whatever knowledge and skills are transmitted to them in English. (Level 8-12)

Looking at these statements, one might ask: What is a foundation vocabulary at level 3-6? How possible would it be to speak English fluently with a limited vocabulary (Notice 'fluency' on the one hand and 'a limited cocabulary' on the other) and to uuerstand and grasp whatever knowledge and skills are transmitted to them in English? The content of these objectives seems ill-defined, open to many interpretations, and, as a result, highly unlikely to be attained. On the other hand, the contents in the restated objectives (pages 17-19) has been characterized rather than defined in absolute terms.

The problem of not stating objectives in clear and operational terms have been endemic for many years in Ethiopia. Abebe in 1974 wrote,

> ...the statement of objectives should indicate directions to changes in behaviour. Therefore writing objectives (instructional objectives requires, among other things, identifying clearly the behavioral aspects and the substantive elements. In Ethiopia, stating objectives in this manner is not yet practiced (p.37).

However, even after nearly thirteen years, Abebe seems to find the situation unchanged, on his 1986 article, he wrote, "The traditional way of formulating objectives at a very broad level seems to be quite dominant" (p.54).

So far, an attempt has been made to examine the degree of adequacy of the objectives of the ESES. The general impression is that although the ESES objectives seem to be designed with some essential components in mind, the verbs used to indicate behavioural aspects tend to be very ambiguous and the content to be covered broad and vague.

2.2 The Selection and Organization of Content in the ESES

A large portion of the Ethiopian School English Syllabus is devoted to content. A detailed list of the structures of the English language is given for each of the grades (3-12), but not to each level as in the objectives. And, nowhere is the rationale

for the selection and organization of content stated.

The ultimate aim of language teaching is to develop students' communicative ability so that they can use the language at ease and with confidence to appropriately, for instance, ask or give information, explain a process, describe a situation, make reference, agree or disagree to ideas, and so on. To this end, how appropriately is the content of the ESES selected and organized to attain this aim?

From the detailed list of the content of the ESES, it seems that the syllabus in its selection and organization of content heavily adopts the principle of the grammatical syllabus whose merits and demerits are cited in Table I above. Experts in language teaching and learning seem to agree that knowledge of the structure of a language, for that matter passive, does not fully develop the communicative ability of students. In Valette's words, "It is not by learning 1000 grammar rules, 1000 verb forms, and 3000 items of vocabulary--- that one can read, speak or understand the lnaguage" (1980, p. 157). It is rather by making use of these forms to perform a variety of different activities essential to the learner that one begins to command the use of a language.

It could be argued that it is the mere focus on the teaching of the structure of the English language that has been the main cause for the complaint of the English Panel of the Ministry of Education. The Panel writes:

One of the great difficulties facing

> thousands of Ethiopian students is that they fail to understand and grasp whatever little knowledge and skills are transmitted to them by their teachers in English... because of lack of adequate english language ability (spoken and written) many Ethiopian students seem to have neither the courage to raise an argument nor the ability to open a discussion forms confidently with their teachers (1979, p.5-6).

Secondly, following the line of Valette and Disick's (1972) categorization of the domains, the ESES extensively deals with the cognitive and psychomotor domains by lumping them together. This is evident both in the objectives and the detail list of content. The affective domain which is concerned with attitude, values, appreciation and so on, is not adequately represented in the syllabus. Some educators believe that successful learning occurs when the cognitive behaviour is related to feelings, interests, attitudes, emotional sets. They also feel that these behaviours provide clues for teachers whether student attitudes and feelings to learning are changing from time to time. Others believe that there is no need of separating the affective domain from the cognitive domain on the ground that the behaviours in this domain follow naturally from the attainment of cognitive objectives. Moreover, they feel that the learning outcomes of the affective objectives such as appreciation, enjoyment, attitude, feeling cannot be reasonably evaluated as the objectives of the cognitive domain. However, as Bertrand and Cebula (1980) pointed out, it would make a syllabus inadequate and ineffective when it ignores

the affective domain, as in the ESES, and concentrates exclusively on the cognitive domain on the assumption that the affective domain follows naturally in any learning or is difficult to test. It must also be understood that human feelings, attitudes are important both as means and ends in education (Tyler quoted in Bertrand and Cebula, 1980).

As a whole, the ESES as it stands now contains objectives which are not clearly stated both in behavioural and content terms. In its selection and organization of content, it adopts the principles of the grammatical syllabus which nowadays are considered less effective in developing students communicative ability. As a result, the ESES seems far from being adequate, relevant and effective to serve its prupose.

So, what has to be done? In the next section some ideas are outlined for consideration in improving the ESES.

3. Suggestions

1. The use of appropriate terms and phrases in educational documents such as the ESES needs special care in order to avoid misinterpretations. One of the issues which needs clarification in the ESES is the use of the term 'objective'. It is not clear whether it refers to 'general objective/' aim' or 'specific objective'. From the nature of each of the statements, the objectives in each level might be called general objectives/aims. However, general objectives need to be broken down into a reasonable

degree of specificity.

In most cases, syllabuses are check-lists for writers of textbooks and teacher training methodology. But on some occasions teachers might be forced to use them. To serve such unforseen eventualities, syllabuses have to be clear enough for the average teacher who needs to know what exactly he is supposed to teach. But they must be slightly general not to harm the resourceful innovative and experienced teacher who wants the freedom to cover old ground with less proficient students and to go ahead with more proficient ones. It must be borne in mind that well stated objectives, among others, may help to construct tests which would measure the extent to which the objectives have been achieved.

2. As stated earlier, the ESES adopts the principles of the structural approach in its designing of objectives and selection and organization of content. In practice, the principles of this approach have been found less fruitful. Alternatively, the use of the principles of the communicative approach has been suggested. Even here, in Ethiopia, the effectiveness of this approach has been noticed. It is therefore, essential to make the ESES communicative oriented. At present, there are many variants of the communicative syllabus as already stated. The choice of variant must be based, among other things, on the suitability of the syllabus to the Ethiopian students' goal, degree of successful implementation, and effectiveness of communicative activities in the Ethiopian teaching/learning situation.

3. The Ethiopian School English Syllabus, as shown earlier, is geared to the teaching of general English.

But the effectiveness of the teaching of general English at senior secondary level and above has been questioned. Instead, the teaching of English has been designed to give students the basic ability to use the language to receive and to convey information associated with their communicative needs. Accordingly, it is appropriate to improve the ESES by including the semantic and functional learning units which suit the needs of at least senior secondary school students. It is clear that, after tenth grade, students of secondary schools are streamed into fields of study such as Science, Art, Business, and the like. At this stage, it is possible to design a purpose specific programme, perhaps a programme such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

It is understandable that a host of problems such as finance, facilities and lack of readiness on the part of teachers could crop up; but, how tolerant can we be in advancing a language teaching programme which, on the one hand, is vital for acquiring knowledge and skill in our system of education and, on the other, is worsening and getting all the more ineffective?

4. Designing a language syllabus is a very complex and a mammoth task. It is not a task that can be left to a few people. It needs the co-operation of experts in language syllabus design, employing organizations and teachers. It has also to be based on a well-researched communicative needs analysis of students. This type of cooperation can be undertaken by experts from the English Panel, the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Language Studies (AAU) and other organizations and individuals concerned.

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