

## Efficacy of English Taught in Lower-Primary to be Used as a Medium in Upper-Primary

Fekede Menuta and Hailu Wubshet\*

**Abstract:** The purpose of this research was to investigate the effect of primary one English lesson in enabling students to use English as a medium of instruction in upper primary schools in Ethiopia. The participants of the study were grade five students and their English language teachers. Cross sectional and descriptive research design was chosen. Classroom observation check list, teacher made tests and interview were used as main data gathering tools. The study showed that, the students' comprehension level was very low; about 70% of them scored less than the average. In the listening skill test, 84.3% of the students scored below the average, and 39.8% of them scored zero. Though the students performed relatively better in note taking, their scores were still less than the average; about 54.5% of them scored below the average. A correlation statistics showed that there was significant difference  $r = -0.48$  in the note taking skills of the students in the three sample schools, but the variation in reading and listening comprehension was not significant. There was no significant variation between gender and language skills. The students' scores, however, significantly varied in different language skills: reading\*listening ( $r = 0.62$ ), reading\*note taking ( $r = 0.59$ ) and listening\*note taking ( $r = 0.56$ ). A classroom practice observation showed that majority (83.33%) of the teachers were using English as a medium of instruction, but 100% of the observed teachers often shifted from English medium to Amharic, which actually is not the mother tongue to most of the students. In a similar observation of students performances in classroom activities, it was found out that majority of the students could not reasonably use English as a medium. The effectiveness of English language taught as a subject in grades 1-4 is highly questionable since majority of the students had difficulties when the language was used as a medium in grade five.

**Key Words:** Efficacy, English, Medium, Upper-primary

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background*

The study is conducted in selected primary schools at Hawassa Zuria district, SNNPR. The reason for selecting these schools is proximity to the researchers for they conduct the study while performing their teaching career in Hawassa University. Furthermore, these schools are among those that the EGRA research was conducted. This study will help to re-examine the situation, and if the issue has improved since the research was conducted.

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This study attempts to examine whether the English language that students learned as a subject during lower primary level (grades 1-4) enables them to use it as a medium of instruction when they reach upper primary level (grades 5-8).

Ministry of Education of the Federal Government of Ethiopia has decided to teach English as a subject starting from grade one. In Ethiopia, the primary schooling is divided into two cycles: the first cycle, grades 1-4 (lower primary) and the second cycle, grades 5-8 (upper primary). Educationalists consider the English taught as a subject in the lower grades is aimed at preparing students to use the language as a medium in the upper grades, colleges and universities.

In Ethiopia medium of instruction was Amharic in the Haile Selassie regime (1941-1974) and during Dergue (1974-1991), the use of Amharic continued as medium and fifteen 'nationality languages' were introduced for illiteracy program (Daniel and Abebayehu, 2006; Getachew and Derib, 2006). In the present ruling system (1991-present) all 'nationality languages' have the right to be used in education, media and other walks of life. The current government allowed not only all languages to be used institutionally, but also for nationalities to choose their script, often either Latin or Ethiopic (Daniel and Alemayehu, 2006).

In the Sothorn Nation Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS), unlike the other regions in the country, the role of mother tongue as medium of instruction, currently though it was not so in the past (Fekede, 2003, 2008; Hirut, 2007), is limited only to the first cycle, grades 1-4. Thus, transition to English medium is early in the SNNPRS, but late by four more years in other regional governments of Ethiopia.

A government general education quality improvement program (GEQIP) was launched in 2009. Its aim was to upgrade teachers' qualifications. Primary school teachers for grades 1 to 4 now need a diploma instead of certificate (UNESCO, 2014). Ministry of Education (MoE) made efforts to make this possible. The statistics by MoE shows a drop in qualified primary school teachers for grades 1 to 4 from 84.9% in 2008/2009 to 15.4% in 2009/10. This percentage has increased to 43.8% in 2012/13 suggesting that grade 1 to 4 primary school teachers are upgrading their qualifications. The percentage of qualified grade 5 to 8 primary school teachers has increased from 71.6% in 2008/9 to 92% in 2012/13 (MoE, 2014). This improvement includes primary school English teachers across the country though the language proficiency of students did not seem improving as expected. It only showed a slight improvement.

Between 2006/7 and 2010/11, national learning assessments (NLA) showed some improvements in percentages of children obtaining basic levels of proficiency in grades 4 and 8. The percentage in grade 4 increased from 41% to 43%, and in grade 8 it increased from 37% to 44%.

On the other hand, in 2008/2009, 63.7% of grade 10 and 55.2% of grade 12 students performed below the basic level. By 2011/2012, students' performance showed some decrease, although the percentages varied among different subjects.

Teaching in Ethiopian primary schools was a hard work. Ethiopia still has the highest student-teacher ratio in the world. It was reported by the World Bank that since 1993-94, the pupil-teacher ratio is 65:1 and the number of pupils per section is 75 to 82 in government primary

schools compared with about 30 in privately operated schools in non-governmental organizations, religious bodies, business enterprises, etc. (World Bank, 2005: xxiv).

However, when the existing primary schooling is visualized in terms of quality and equity, it is observed that privately run ultra-modern primary schools mushroomed from 6 percent in 2009 to 11 percent in 2010 (See world Bank, 2012) in order to serve the sons and daughters of a newly emerging privileged class. On the other hand, the sons and daughters of the poor and disadvantaged are confined to over-crowded classes manned by semi-qualified teachers and equipped with a dearth of instructional materials.

To improve the situation, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, together with its partners, designed and implemented projects that intended to improve the status of English language teaching in public primary schools. Teaching English for Life Learning (TELL) is one of these efforts. It aims to improve English teaching in primary schools. New textbooks in English, Amharic and other mother tongues have been printed and distributed to primary schools. TELL initiated a nationwide in-service teacher training program and an early grades reading assessment (EGRA).

TELL was begun as an attempt to enhance the teaching - learning of English by training a group of master trainees in improved instruction techniques with new English textbooks and teacher guides. The trained master trainees trained other high school trainers who in turn trained teachers in each region of the country. Trainers of teachers provided a 4 day in-service training to primary school teachers. Teaching techniques for grades 1 and 2 teachers focused on teaching children to speak, listen, read and write English, and on vocabulary learning and storytelling methods. Many different strategies were taught to grades 3 and 4 teachers. These strategies include: turn & talk, five word prediction, tell something, table talk, 3-2-1, ABC brain storm, anticipation guide, double entry, etc. The training continued to focus on reading, writing, vocabulary and storytelling.

In a follow-up, three months later, some of the teachers were using the new techniques. Teachers for grades 1 and 2 had much difficulty in using unfamiliar techniques that required children to think and talk aloud independently. Teachers for grades 3 and 4 seldom used *double entry*. This was a strategy that required interaction with peers to categorize information from a text. Constraints mentioned by all teachers included large class sizes, children at different ability levels, lack of time and new textbooks.

In 2010, an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) for mother tongue found regional differences between 10% and 70% of grade 2 children who were unable to read. About 90% of grade 3 children also scored below the expected oral reading fluency rate (UNESCO, 2014). Low reading ability was related to accessibility of students' textbook or other supportive reading materials.

The impetus of this study arose from the researchers' personal experience as teacher trainers. The researchers had got chances of having informal talk with primary school English language teachers and other content subject teachers. Both groups of teachers were complaining about their students' inability to use English language. Some even complained that students in second

cycle could not even copy correctly from a blackboard. These teachers mentioned various factors that contributed to the students' inability of understanding and using English to their level best. Some put the blame on mother tongue education, others on the English language teachers who taught the kids in primary one (first cycle), and still some others blamed the students' background (family, social status of their family, exposure, etc.).

Furthermore, a study of English instruction in primary schools of the Gedeo and Sidama Zones in Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples regional State (SNNPRS) of Ethiopia found that grade 5 students' English was so poor that they were unable to follow classroom instruction. The teachers' English language skill was too poor to teach the students, and there was lack of English teaching materials (Yimer et al, 2012).

So, after repeatedly hearing and reading these kinds of complaints, the researchers wanted to conduct an empirical study to find out if the students at the exit of lower primary and beginning of upper primary, that is grade five, can use English as a medium. The findings of this study will serve as a feedback in the improvement of first cycle lower primary English language teaching and learning.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of English taught as a subject in lower primary in enabling students to use English as a medium of instruction in upper primary. It specifically tries to:

- evaluate the students' reading comprehension ability,
- investigate the students' listening comprehension ability,
- examine the students' note-taking ability, and
- find out whether there is a significant difference between boys and girls in comprehension as well as note taking skills.

### ***Research Methodology***

The research design was cross-sectional and descriptive with mixed methodology. The specific methods used were interview, classroom observation, and tests. Observation checklist and interview guide were the tools used to obtain the data. Tests on reading, listening, and writing were prepared from grade four text books that they had already completed by the researchers. The difficulty levels of the tests were graded for the difficulty level by subject teachers. The research participants include grade five students and teachers of the selected schools. A total of 108 students were selected; 36 from each school with equal number of male and female students using systematic sampling. There were six teachers who were teaching English at grade five in the three sample school; all of them were included. The data from checklist and test results were analyzed using descriptive statistics; and data obtained from interview was summarized into themes.

## **RESULTS**

### *Presentation of Results*

The tests in this study consisted of two reading comprehensions each of which consisted of a paragraph. The first paragraph had six questions in which students were asked to supply information, which often was a word or phrase, based on the passage. The second reading material had five questions, which had to be answered by writing 'True' or 'False' regarding information provided in the passage. Quite reasonable time, 3 minutes for each question, was given for the students.

The listening test was based on a short paragraph which was read to the students. The text was read to the students twice. In the first phase, they listened to get the general idea of the story; then, they listened to it again to answer the questions which were printed and distributed to them prior to the initial reading phase. Then, the students were asked to supply the correct information asked based on the listening. Just a word or a phrase was expected for each question.

The writing test was based on five sentences which had a length of 7-12 words. They were somehow organized from short to long ones. Each sentence was dictated to the students. They had the chance to listen to the sentences twice while the sentences were read in reasonably slow speed. The sentences were corrected word for word so that the extent of accuracy could be measured instead of marking the whole sentence as a correct or incorrect. The total number of words in the five sentences was 44. The score of the students in the three schools in the three types of tests is discussed below. Table-1 shows the reading test result of the students:

Table-1: Reading comprehension

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	1.00	6	5.6	5.6
	1.50	2	1.9	7.4
	2.00	12	11.1	18.5
	2.50	1	.9	19.4
	3.00	8	7.4	26.9
	3.50	6	5.6	32.4
	4.00	16	14.8	47.2
	4.50	1	.9	48.1
Valid	5.00	23	21.3	69.4
	5.50	3	2.8	72.2
	6.00	14	13.0	85.2
	7.00	7	6.5	91.7
	8.00	3	2.8	94.4
	8.50	1	.9	95.4
	9.00	2	1.9	97.2
	10.00	3	2.8	100.0
Total	108	100.0	100.0	

About 69.5%, which is nearly 70%, of the students scored below the average 5.5 marks out of 11 in the reading comprehension test. However, many (21.3%) of them scored nearly half, that is 5 out of 11. Only, 3 students (2.8%) have scored an average 5.5 mark. About 27.9 % of the students, 13% of which in the bottom line to the average mark, scored above the average. Of which, very few, 5 students (4.7%) exceptionally scored high, 9 or 10 out of 11. Thus, the students' comprehension level is very low, less than average.

The listening test consisted of six questions all of which were subjective in the sense the students had to write a word or a phrase as an answer rather than choose a distracter from given alternatives. The students' listening test scores are shown in Table-2:

Table-2: Listening scores

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	43	39.8	39.8
	1.00	20	18.5	58.3
	1.50	6	5.6	63.9
	2.00	22	20.4	84.3
	3.00	9	8.3	92.6
	4.00	6	5.6	98.1
	5.00	2	1.9	100.0
	Total	108	100.0	100.0

As can be seen from the Table-2, majority of the students (39.8%) scored zero out of six. Total of 84.3% of the students scored below the average that is 3 out of six. Of 108 students, only nine (8.3%) of them scored the average score 3. A few, 8(7.5%), scored above the average. This implies that the students had great difficulty to listen to and comprehend reasonably short and simple texts spoken in English.

The note taking which had 5 sentences and 44 words was marked in terms of the correctly spelled words in each sentence. Relatively, the students have better spelled more words on average in the sentence repetition than they did in the listening test. Table-3 shows the frequency and percentile of the students score in ranges (see the individual frequency table annexed) in the listening and note taking exercise.

Table-3: Note taking

Ranges	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Between 1-10	28	25.93	25.93	25.93
Valid Between 11-20	25	23.15	23.15	49.08
Between 21-30	44	40.74	40.74	89.82

Between 31-40	11	10.16	10.16	99.98
Total	108	99.98	99.98	

From the 108 students, 25.93% of them scored below 11 out of 44 words in a sentence; 23.15 % of them have scored below 21 out of 44, but relatively a higher number of students (40.74%) scored between 21 and 30. There were a few students (10.16%) who scored high score (31-40). Generally, 61 (54.5%) of the students scored below the average, that is, they could spell 22 words out of 44 words). Less than half of them, 47(45.5%), scored above the average. Since 45.5% is less than 50% only by 5%, the students have relatively performed better in the dictation than in the reading and listening comprehensions. However, since dictation somehow involves imitation than comprehension, it is not possible to claim that the students' understanding of English in the dictation is high.

A correlation statistics was run to check if there were relationships among the variables, such as the school in which the students study, gender, and students' scores in different skills; namely, reading, listening and note taking. Table-4 below shows the correlation of these variables.

Table-4: Correlations

		School of Ss	Sex of Student	Reading comprehension	Listening	Note taking
School of Ss	Pearson Correlation	1	.000	-.153	.009	-.481**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		1.000	.114	.929	.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Sex of Student	Pearson Correlation	.000	1	.053	.093	-.098
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000		.582	.340	.313
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Reading comprehension	Pearson Correlation	-.153	.053	1	.615**	.590**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.114	.582		.000	.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Listening	Pearson Correlation	.009	.093	.615**	1	.556**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.929	.340	.000		.000
	N	108	108	108	108	108
Note taking	Pearson Correlation	-.481**	-.098	.590**	.556**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.313	.000	.000	
	N	108	108	108	108	108

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There was no difference between the school of the students and their sex since there were equal number of boys and girls in the sample population. There was some difference in the reading comprehension of students in the three schools. The correlation is negative (i.e.-0.153), when the score in one of the school increases, it decreases in the other schools. Since -0.153 (nearly -0.2) is at the lower margin of significance and the magnitude of correlation is very low. There was no correlation between the schools of students and their scores in listening. However, there was significant difference between performances of the students in the three schools in note taking. The  $r = -0.48$  shows that the difference is inversely related among the schools compared.

Sex of the students and their scores in the three tests was not as such significant, and was very low in magnitude as Sex\*Reading ( $r= 0.05$ ), Sex\*Listening ( $r=0.09$ ), and Sex\*Note taking ( $r= -0.09$ ) are below 0.2, which is in the range of minimum correlation margin.

There was a significant difference between the students' scores in the three types of tests: Reading\*Listening ( $r=0.62$ ), Reading\*Note taking ( $r=0.59$ ) and Listening\*Note taking ( $r=0.56$ ). In this case, the magnitude of the correlation is also high implying that there is somehow individual difference in the students' performances.

To find out the variation in the students' performance, statistics showing the mean and standard deviation was computed, and the result is shown in the Table-5:

Table-5: Mean & deviation from the mean

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading comprehension	108	4.57	2.09	0.20
Listening	108	1.24	1.31	0.13
Note taking	108	19.14	9.77	0.94

As can be seen from Table-5, the students mean score was below the average in all the three tests ( $4.57 < 5.5$ ,  $1.24 < 3$  and  $19.14 < 22$ ). The students reading comprehension score deviated from the mean in slightly less than 50%. Their scores in listening deviated from the mean in more than 50% as 1.31 is greater than the mean 1.24. Relatively a smaller, but nearly about 40% deviations from the mean, was observed in note taking through dictation.

### ***Observation Results***

Observation was made while, teachers were teaching, asking questions, and managing the students' group activities. The students, as well, were observed while taking notes, answering questions and discussing in groups.

Six teachers were observed while teaching different subjects. Teacher-1 and 2 were teaching physics and mathematics in Wondo elementary, respectively. Teacher-3 and Teacher-4 were teaching integrated science and mathematics, respectively in Wondowosha elementary school.



Teacher-5 and Teacher-6 were teaching English and integrated science in Wondo Den elementary school. Table-6 below shows the result obtained with observation:

Table-6: Observation of Teachers activities

Items: Teachers:	Observed	1=Yes, 2=No						100%	
		T-1	T-2	T-3	T-4	T-5	T-6	Yes	No
The teacher uses English as a medium of instruction		1	1	1	2	1	1	83.33	16.66
The teacher often shifts to students' mother tongue.		1	1	1	1	1	1	100	0
The teacher completely uses local language as a medium.		2	2	2	1	2	2	16.66	83.33
The teacher sometimes shifts to students' mother tongue when s/he feels students did not understand.		1	1	1	2	1	1	83.33	16.66

As can be seen from the observation results, majority (83.33%) of the teachers were using English as a medium of instruction, but only one teacher (16.66%) was more often using Amharic as a medium. With regard to item-2, all the six (100%) of the teachers were often shifting to Amharic, but not to the Sidamu Afo, which most students speak. As shown in the item-3 of Table-6, only 1 (16.66%) of the teachers completely shifted to the local language, Amharic, the rest 5 (83.33%) of them shifted to a local language only occasionally. Item-4 of Table-6 show that only one person did not shift to the students mother tongue even when the students face, as it was observed, showed misunderstandings; all the rest (83.33%) of the teachers shifted to local a language when they thought their students get confused.

The observation made on students' activity was not particular to the sampled students, but it was based on what was going on in the classroom as a whole. In some cases, the activities observed were performed by a few of the students but not by all the students. In such instances, we marked both 'yes' and 'no', yet we put an asterisk (\*) before the 'yes' or 'no' to express that there was more tendency towards the number in asterisk that represented the 'yes' or 'no'. Table-7 shows the observed students tendency to perform a given activity:

Table-7: Observation on students' activities

Activity	1=Yes, 2=No	
Students listen and respond questions asked in English.	1	*2
Students understand written instructions in English.	1	*2
Students ask questions in English.		2
The students can reasonably use English in their lessons.		2

All the students were taking the notes written in English on the blackboard, but their accuracy varied as we have witnessed. Many of the students could answer questions they were asked, but a

slightly more than half of the students did not do so even when the questions sounded simpler. With regard to reading, relatively the majority of the students managed to read and understand texts which were given to them, but some of the students had difficulties in reading as well. As to the spoken instructions, relatively large a number of them have understood the instruction, yet some of them had difficulties, and they had to ask what to do after a while, often with Amharic. Many of the students had difficulties to understand written instructions unless the instructor had orally explained to them what to do and how to do them. Regarding language use for group discussions, many of the students shifted to Amharic and sometimes to Sidamu afo; they tried using English only when the teacher who was observing what the students were doing was nearer to a group. As to the asking questions, we observed that only the teacher asked questions, and the students tried their best to respond. There were no questions asked by the students. Generally, it is not possible to say that the students could reasonably use English in their lessons since there were difficulties in most language use activities observed.

### ***Interview Results***

The interview conducted mainly focused on if the students in grade five manageably understand English, take notes in English and respond to questions in English, whether the teachers were using English, and as to why teachers were code-mixing or totally shifting to Amharic or Sidamu afo while teaching.

The result showed that majority of the students could not speak in English, could not take note from dictation and lectures, the majority of the learners shifted either to Amharic or Sidamu afo, failed to understand instructions on activities if it is in English only, so teachers have to repeat the instructions in Amharic and/or Sidamu afo.

The students did not understand the lessons in English for a number of reasons such as: they did not study English well in lower primary, teachers do not teach them in a simple English which they may understand and teachers themselves have no confidence in using English.

Many of the teachers were using English, yet some teachers do not bother much to use English. The reason teacher gave for not using English a medium was the students do not understand them. This led to them to translate or mix the languages. They assume that the translation and mix help students to understand concepts during discussion and lectures

### **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that students cannot read in English well and their comprehension level is low. They cannot take notes from oral discussions and dictations. Thus, the efficacy of English taught as a subject in grades 1-4 to be used as a medium in upper primary is low and insufficient. It seems relevant to re-visit the language use policy and/ or the delivery method in lower and upper primary schools in Sidama Zone in particular and Ethiopia in general.

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## Appendix

Table-3: Note taking

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	1.00	6	5.6	5.6
	4.00	2	1.9	7.4
	5.00	8	7.4	14.8
	6.00	2	1.9	16.7
	7.00	2	1.9	18.5
	8.00	2	1.9	20.4
	9.00	2	1.9	22.2
	10.00	4	3.7	25.9
	12.00	1	.9	26.9
	13.00	2	1.9	28.7
	14.00	4	3.7	32.4
	15.00	1	.9	33.3
	16.00	2	1.9	35.2
	17.00	5	4.6	39.8
	18.00	2	1.9	41.7
	19.00	5	4.6	46.3
	20.00	3	2.8	49.1
Valid	21.00	6	5.6	54.6
	23.00	2	1.9	56.5
	24.00	4	3.7	60.2
	25.00	11	10.2	70.4
	26.00	6	5.6	75.9
	27.00	3	2.8	78.7
	28.00	4	3.7	82.4
	29.00	2	1.9	84.3
	30.00	6	5.6	89.8
	31.00	3	2.8	92.6
	32.00	2	1.9	94.4
	33.00	1	.9	95.4
	34.00	2	1.9	97.2
	35.00	2	1.9	99.1
	38.00	1	.9	100.0
	Total	108	100.0	100.0