

The Education of English Teachers in the Ethiopian Higher Education: The Missing Ingredients

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Abstract

English language teachers bear a significant responsibility in ensuring students' proficiency. However, the training of English language teachers has not received adequate attention, with curricula often being perceived as mere replicas of established models. Despite significant effort in training English teachers, the TEFL/ELT program has not been thoroughly examined to determine the extent to which its packages meet workplace demands. This study, therefore, investigated the responsiveness of Ethiopian English language teaching programs by examining the perspectives of English language teacher educators and students, as well as curriculum documents. Results revealed substantial mismatches between curricular content, which is almost a replication across universities, and linguistic, pedagogical, and technological competencies. The data indicated that the program placed inadequate emphasis on English language proficiency development, limited training on contemporary ELT issues, insufficient integration of technology, and curricula and second language teacher education practice were overly dominated by general education topics, with minimal ELT-specific depth. The results suggest a reconceptualization of the TEFL/ELT curriculum that foregrounds workplace-demand-driven TPACK (Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge) competencies.

Keywords: *TEFL curriculum, TPACK, knowledge bases, English language teaching, language proficiency, English language teacher education, higher education*

Introduction

English is a dominant medium of communication across educational, economic, and social domains - personal, professional, and institutional- and it is a global lingua franca that serves as a catalyst in academic and professional networks (Crystal, 2010; Plonski et al., 2013). The language is currently an essential means of communication in the education sector. In the education realm, it is almost unthinkable to gain knowledge in various fields

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without English. The development of English language mastery cannot be achieved without a robust English language teaching field aligned with comprehensive and responsive teacher education programs.

In multilingual African contexts, English increasingly serves not only as an instructional language but also as a critical resource for socioeconomic mobility and global engagement (Coleman, 2011; Nigussie, 2011). In Africa, English is preferred over other languages and is now officially used by most African countries, including former French colonies (Nigussie, 2011; Plonski et al., 2013). Nigussie further suggests that Ethiopia and other African countries should continue to use English, as it provides them with opportunities to develop their economies and engage in political affairs.

Ethiopia is no exception. The English language is widely used in secondary schools and higher education. Instruction and assessment are predominantly delivered in English. English is not only a medium of instruction in Ethiopia; it also serves as a means of workplace communication in many organizations. A simple look at the homepages of the House of Federation, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, private real estate companies, Ethio-telecom, and many others reveals that English is the preferred language of communication alongside Amharic (Eshetie, 2010). Nevertheless, Bogale (2009) disagrees with this contention, arguing that the practical use of English is limited to a few sectors. Although historically French, Italian, Arabic, and English served mainly the education sector, English has gained increasing dominance in education and business since the 1940s (Eshetie, 2010; Nigussie, 2011). The Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), in its Education and Training Policy (ETP), permits regional states to determine the grade at which English must be introduced as the medium of instruction.

English shall be taught as a subject from grade one. The regions can make their own decisions as to which grade level English as a medium of instruction should start. Yet it is mandatory to use English as a medium of instruction from grade 9 upwards. (MOE, 2023, Art 4.3).

Following this, regional states have opted to use English as the medium of instruction from grade seven. In higher education institutions, including TVETs, English is an essential

language of instruction, without which learners are unlikely to achieve reasonable academic success.

There are two main ways to do this. Firstly, a language can be made the official language of a country, used as a medium of communication in domains such as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system. To get on in these societies, it is essential to master the official language as early in life as possible. Such a language is often described as a 'second language', because it is seen as a complement to a person's mother tongue, or 'first language' (Crystal, 2010, p. 4).

It seems that, because of this definition, Kassaye (2007) contends that in Ethiopia, English is rather a second language, used neck and neck with Amharic. So the increasing role of English across all sectors, in general and in education in particular, is notable.

The implication is that in a country like Ethiopia, where English is the medium of instruction, the ability to learn heavily depends on whether teachers and students possess both general proficiency and classroom language proficiency; then, if students and teachers are deficient in the required English language skills, we can hardly expect positive outcomes in students' achievement. This is primarily because learning takes place through interaction, which is done through English. De facto, teachers often use students' mother tongues while teaching subject areas, yet examinations are always conducted in English, and the readings are prepared in English.

Better English, therefore, means that learners can have a meaningful classroom interaction, turning their effort into positive learning gains. This implies that the English language is a key factor that can enhance the quality of teaching and learning, thereby significantly leading to improved student achievement (Woodrow, 2006). Further, English can play a crucial role in determining one's success in academia as it paves the way for publication and in global knowledge exchange.

The preparation of English language teachers, therefore, takes a crucial place in the education system. If we have well-trained English language teachers, we are likely to experience meaningful classroom interaction, which tends to provide a scaffold for learners as well. Conversely, the absence of good English teachers would have a negative repercussion as students would have no one to model for the development of their own English. In an

interview with first-year students, I discovered that those exposed to poor models tended to have lower proficiency and confidence in language mastery. One of the students I asked attributed his wrong English to being copied from his teachers at school.' Others blame their teachers for teaching them so poorly.

Rapid global changes are continually reshaping the demands placed on the ELT curriculum. Things cannot remain static. So does the English language teaching program. My argument stems from the readings I have made about English language teacher education/preparation, as well as from my experience as an English language teacher educator. I would say that the kind of English-language teaching program we need should respond to the workplace demands. The central question, therefore, would be the degree to which the Ethiopian Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) curriculum responds to the actual needs. (I should state that, in this article, TEFL and ELT are used interchangeably to refer to the teaching of English as a foreign language, and no distinction between the two is intended). The workplace for teachers, according to Thomsett et al. (2011), is the classroom, where teachers are tasked with teaching the four language skills and other language components to assist students in developing these skills for authentic communication. While TEFL is now a rapidly expanding field of study in Ethiopian higher education, graduating hundreds and thousands every year, it is judicious to ask what these graduates are trained in and how the training has helped them in the business of teaching English. So I ask 'What do we need TEFL graduates to do after their graduation?' I initially observed that universities have different curricula. However, it would be pragmatic to highlight similar competence areas if we acknowledge sharing similar problems and a common ground and rationale for teaching English.

Prominent writers attempted to define the knowledge bases for TEFL. For example, (Vélez-Rendón, 2002) categorizes the knowledge bases for those who aspire to become English teachers as (1) Subject-Matter Knowledge that involves language proficiency, pragmatic awareness, and language analysis. He emphasizes that language proficiency is crucial. (2) Pedagogical Content Knowledge. In the same vein, Richards (2006) suggests that English language teachers should be familiar with preparing and implementing

communicative-oriented activities, establishing an appropriate balance between fluency and accuracy, and identifying and appropriately addressing learners' errors, among other skills.

Richards and Farrell (2011) suggest that a teacher's ability to acquire both the discourse of TESOL and to use effective classroom language is a key dimension of TEFL educators' preparation. We still have a long way to go when preparing our teacher learners for the realities they will face during their teaching careers. There is still a disjuncture between theory provided in SLT preparation programs and practice in real classrooms, a gap that needs to be narrowed (Farrell, 2018).

More recent scholarship reinforces the need for teacher education programs to develop teachers' language awareness, technological competence, and ability to teach in linguistically diverse classrooms (e.g., Freeman, 2016; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). These developments reflect a global shift toward preparing teachers who are not only methodologically informed but also adaptive, reflective, and responsive to rapidly evolving communication contexts.

Taken together, the body of research underscores that teacher effectiveness depends on integrating linguistic proficiency, methodological expertise, and context-sensitive professional judgment, an integration that must be deliberately cultivated through teacher education curricula. This integration is inherently developmental, emerging through sustained engagement with theory, reflective practice, and supervised classroom experience. Teacher education programs, therefore, play a critical role in creating structured learning environments that encourage prospective teachers to connect knowledge with practice, evaluate their instructional choices, and adapt to evolving classroom realities.

A review of two relevant previous studies can help us see the tension between the teachers' education. Hirpa et al. (2024) investigated the knowledge bases of English language teachers at the upper primary level. They found that teachers' content knowledge, particularly their ability to use English for communicative purposes, was notably weak, while other areas of professional knowledge were rated at a moderate level. In contrast, Mihiretie (2023) argues that effective teacher preparation can be achieved by placing greater emphasis on general pedagogical training, with comparatively less focus on subject-matter knowledge. This divergence highlights an ongoing debate in English language teacher education concerning

the relative importance of pedagogical competence versus linguistic proficiency in preparing effective teachers. So far as I know, there is a dearth of empirical enquiry into examining the TEFL programs. The studies are confined to learner variables, language skills development, and/or teacher professionalism.

This raises an important question about the degree to which the MA-TEFL programs in Ethiopian higher education align with the teachers' needs and workplace demands. I realize that the TEFL program has continued to produce large cohorts of graduates each year. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how effectively these programs respond to market demands and prepare English teachers for the communicative, technologically evolving classrooms of today.

Grounded in this context, the present study investigates the alignment between Ethiopian MA-TEFL curricula and the practical expectations of teacher trainees and institutions. Drawing on the perspectives of in-service teachers enrolled in the TEFL programs, teacher educators in universities, and an analysis of the curriculum documents from five universities, this study identifies the 'missing ingredients' in the current English teacher education schemes. The findings aim to contribute to policy and academic dialogue on English language teacher education reforms and to inform more responsive, workplace-demand-oriented approaches to preparing English teachers in Ethiopia.

In more specific terms, the study was guided by two research questions: (1) To what extent does the Ethiopian MA in TEFL curriculum align with teachers' professional needs and workplace expectations? (2) What specific gaps do trainees and educators identify in current programs? The findings aim to contribute to national dialogue on TEFL curriculum reform and inform more responsive, practice-oriented approaches to English language teacher education in Ethiopia.

Methods

Guided by a social constructivist perspective, this qualitative study compiles and interprets data from in-service trainee teachers and professors in TEFL, curriculum documents, secondary sources, and the researcher's positionality and reflexive analysis. The study can be considered a baseline enquiry, in which data are examined to systematically

critique the TEFL curriculum. It serves as a baseline by establishing an initial point of reference for existing curricular and pedagogical provisions in light of actual workplace demands, without introducing an intervention. Thus, it is an exploratory study that examines deficiencies in TEFL programs in Ethiopia through a meticulous analysis of the perspectives of TEFL trainees and professors. This multipronged approach allowed for triangulation across data sources and enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in professional background, regional representation, and years of service, reflecting qualitative research standards for information-rich cases (Patton, 2023). Thus, in-service teacher trainees (N=12) enrolled in master's studies in TEFL or ELT in 2022/23 participated. English language teacher educators (N=7) were also included in the study. The English language teacher educators offered expert perspectives on curriculum delivery, student performance, and institutional expectations, contributing a complementary layer of professional insight.

Instruments

- Focus Group Discussions (FGD): Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers who were upgrading themselves with a master's in TEFL program and had volunteered to participate in the study. These people (n=12) from 2022/23 were from different regions of Ethiopia. Each had a bachelor's degree in English education, but they were nominated for their respective regions to further their education. Hence, they came for their master's in TEFL study with the expectation, besides upgrading their rank, that they would improve their English language proficiency and ELT skills. They attended their studies during the summer period (July and August). While they were studying in the summer, they had to return to their schools to teach their classes for the rest of the year. Teachers' teaching experience ranged from 8 to 16 years, with an average of 9.9. The FGD lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes.

I conducted another FGD with professors (teacher educators) from various universities who were gathered to administer these examinations for TEFL candidates. Seven professors who were available volunteered and participated in the 50-minute group interview. These participants offered expert perspectives on curriculum delivery, student performance, and institutional expectations, contributing a complementary layer of professional insight.

Two rounds of FGDs were conducted: one with in-service teachers and one with university TEFL educators. The teachers' FGD lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes, while the educators' FGD lasted 50 minutes. Both discussions were facilitated by guiding questions that explored participants' appraisal of the MA-TEFL curriculum, looking into curricular provisions and actual demands. The FGDs were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken during and immediately after each session to capture contextual impressions, group dynamics, and emerging themes.

- Another important instrument was the document review (the TEFL Master's Curriculum). The TEFL curriculum documents from five universities were consulted. These documents contained descriptions of rationales, graduate profiles, and courses, among other topics. Thus, the curricula from each university were carefully examined, focusing on the course components and how they are intended to be delivered. This study, furthermore, consulted secondary sources and global conceptions of the TEFL knowledge base. The literature in this regard is used as a mirror to examine the practice. A document-analysis matrix was developed to code each curriculum for thematic categories such as linguistic proficiency, pedagogical content knowledge, assessment literacy, technology integration, and disciplinary depth, drawing on established frameworks in teacher education (Freeman, 2018; Johnson & Golombek, 2016).
- Researcher reflexivity and positionality, where I reflected on my experiences as an English language teacher educator, were employed to examine, through my professional experiences and close observations, how the interpretation of the curricular and pedagogical practices in relation to workplace realities was shaped.

Reflexive notes were taken as interpretive sources to corroborate and interrogate patterns emerging from focus group discussions and document analysis, contributing to the triangulation of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2002). Therefore, I systematically reflected on my own assumptions, views, and/or reactions, keeping written notes to inform and support analysis. By making my positionality explicit, this approach was intended to enhance transparency, situate situated knowledge within the research context, and contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations.

Data analysis: A thematic analysis framework was employed in the study. Data from each source were brought together for a desk review. These data were consulted and triangulated. Thus, my understanding of the phenomenon is mainly dependent on the data that came from the various sources. In conducting the analysis, broad categories rather than smaller codes were developed. Narratives and quotations from participants supported each broad category (i.e., theme). Data trustworthiness was primarily achieved through member checking, where data from each participant, along with possible interpretations, were shared with all participants. The analysis was conducted after the members approved the qualitative data. Codes were then refined through axial coding to identify relationships among concepts, leading to the development of broader thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Two independent coders reviewed approximately 30% of the dataset to enhance analytic rigor. Intercoder agreement was discussed and reconciled until consensus was reached, ensuring reliability in theme development.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted: participants reviewed transcripts and preliminary interpretations to confirm accuracy and alignment with their experiences. Triangulation from multiple data sources (teachers, educators, curriculum documents, and researcher positionality and reflexive analysis) increased the dependability of the results. The relevant institutional review board granted ethical approval. All participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was protected by anonymizing names and

institutions. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without repercussions.

Results and discussion

As described in the methods section, this study aimed to understand the tension between TEFL programs in Ethiopia and workplace demands. Data were collected from in-service teachers enrolled in their TEFL studies. Further data were gathered from the English language teacher educators. The central question in my mind was whether the TEFL program was relevant to teachers' actual engagements – teaching and research. Below are the results grouped by themes.

- **Mismatch between expectation and reality**

A central issue that teachers repeatedly highlighted was a mismatch between what they expected from the TEFL program and what they were supposed to do in schools. The program was generally rated as shallow, lacking the challenges that would have been more linguistically and pedagogically enriching. For some, the program aimed to enhance their knowledge through a multitude of topics in language learning theories, practice English language teaching skills, and stay up to date with the state of the art. However, as one of the participants mentioned, '...the program did not engage us well as it is full of presentations that were done hastily.' (S 7)

Another participant mentioned:

I completed my BA in Amharic and enrolled in a master's program in TEFL. I was pretty surprised to finish my education with few challenges. I was asked to make presentations on topics that I do not remember (St 1)

For this man, the program did not bring a challenge. A participant with 16 years of experience stressed that he found the TEFL program fell short of his expectations.

I had expected a lot from the science of teaching English skills in multifaceted areas, but that was not the case. We ended up with courses that can also serve other teachers.

... most of the topics seemed mediocre to me. We tried to stretch between many issues, but could not master one of these (S3)

An important point this discussant mentioned is that the courses were mainly confined to general education topics. He extended his talk and asked 'Where is the specialization in TEFL or ELT?'

Another discussant who taught English for 10 years in a small town in Desie city complained about the deficiency in the TEFL program:

I came here with the hope of growing professionally. After completing my first year of study, I returned to school, but I could not see how I could apply what I had learned. I think this is perhaps because it lacked hands-on activities. (S2).

In describing how she teaches, one discussant said: 'I ask them [her students] to listen to me, and I will lecture...this helps me cover the contents in time ' (S4)

Others shared these views even though the perspectives varied. However, two important lessons can be drawn from the discussants' remarks. The topics covered in class were highly outdated, and students relied on short notes (PPTs) given by the professors.

In some cases, I feel like what we have learned may not be sufficient for our engagement in the actual classroom teaching of the English language. Modern topics and innovations are significantly missing, implying that there is a mismatch between what we are supposed to do and what is delivered in the program. (S6)

By and large, participants stated that the ELT/TEFL curriculum falls short of aligning with real classroom practice in the modern ELT context.

Professors' dissatisfaction

The demand for English teachers from governments is skyrocketing. Nevertheless, this pressure on universities seems to be causing a deterioration in the quality of TEFL programs.

There is a considerable demand on the Ministry's side. This is affecting the quality. A large number of students come every summer, and we are required to teach many of them.

To do the teaching practice-led is tough. I hardly see success in helping the students grasp the main theoretical and practical matters. (P. 2)

In the same vein, other teacher educators underscored that the TEFL curriculum and its implementation lacked a pragmatic consideration of what teaching English required.

One educator emphatically said:

The problem I have with these MA students is twofold: one is their poor English language proficiency, which is seen in their papers and presentations throughout; the other is that they do not know very well about the teaching of English language skills (P. 6)

From my own experience, I rarely heard teacher educators in TEFL acknowledge the program's quality. It seems many educators did so because they were required to in the curriculum or the TEFL program. They rarely showed effort to implement. The effect is evident in their academic writing and research products, which are often of poor quality. Many professors felt despair, and I was no exception. It took me a long time to help my students in the TEFL program write well, as I tried to provide scaffolding to improve their accuracy and research methodology. Sometimes it feels like coaching a novice learner on everything.

Features of the TEFL curricula

Upon reviewing the courses and descriptions, I realized that the curriculum primarily focuses on a few general education areas, which may have a limited impact on the development of EFL practitioners. Courses such as Theories and approaches in language teaching (predominantly historical developments), teacher education (which is not designed, to a greater extent, for English teachers), syllabus and material design, literature in language teaching, and language testing are largely replicative, exhibiting minimal variation. The curricula fail to incorporate the state of the art, leaving gaps in crucial areas, such as new trends in second-language learning/acquisition, technologies involving artificial intelligence, and language skills development. The teaching of English is covered in 3 of the 5 documents,

yet their content is largely outdated, failing to capture evolving trends that may reflect the dynamics of TEFL. As I mentioned earlier, no theory or practice would remain static. Pedagogical practices are inherently dynamic.

I observed that Ethiopian TEFL is not doing its job.

- The program falls short of addressing fundamental issues such as 'English language communication skills', which should be the core foundation of any TEFL/ELT program
- Expectations of institutions and people are not entertained, creating a gap between program objectives and real teaching contexts.
- Research outputs and their implications are greatly overlooked, with little evidence of alignment of the educational practices with empirical research recommendations.
- Observing classrooms and technological advancements highlights how the TEFL programs ought to be and how they should be delivered. The delivery and assessment methods lack pragmatic consideration of what trainees are expected to do in actual classrooms.
- The TEFL/ELT program generally appears to be prescriptive, putting greater emphasis on rigid curricular provisions and conventions. This highlights the need for pedagogical reform to better inform the program and enable it to respond to innovations and context-responsive teaching.

TEFL vis-à-vis the Knowledge Base

The TEFL knowledge base rests on two salient aspects – subject-matter knowledge (English language proficiency) and the art and science of teaching English language skills (Richards & Farrell, 2011; Vélez-Rendón, 2002). The latter, according to Richards (2006), should emphasize features of communicative language teaching and learning. Seen against this, it is obvious that general education topics are rampant throughout, while very little room is given to developing students' English language skills. Exceptions to this conclusion are two curricula that include Academic Reading and Writing as a course. The English language

teaching methods course appears to cover older topics. Generally, I find the TEFL curriculum far behind the state of the art in language teaching/learning. It seems to equip trainees hardly at all to cope with the challenges of the 21st-century classroom.

This seems to agree with what Chick observed. In his observation, Chick noted that teachers had '... limited theoretical and linguistic knowledge in the delivery' (Chick, 2015). It is not that taxing to make learners adept at managing a class; rather, they lack declarative knowledge of language teaching (Chick, 2015). This impedes teachers' efforts to bridge the gap between why they do things the way they do. The goal of language teaching is to enable learners to become users of the language in various communicative situations (Leung & Scarino, 2016). The language teacher preparation program, therefore, should enhance teachers' capacity to perform this.

As mentioned in the introduction, this study observed contrasting perspectives from two local studies, although each focused on a limited aspect. Birbirso (2014) reported that English language teachers' problems with the medium, English, are a critical issue; however, he attributes this problem to socio-economic factors, which I think do not directly determine English language proficiency development. Hirpa et al. (2024) reported that the English language teachers were deficient in content and had low English proficiency. Another study, though not subject-specific, declaratively emphasized the role of general pedagogical knowledge over other knowledge bases, including content (Mihiretie, 2023). The findings of this study align with and extend previous local research on English teacher knowledge and preparation. While Hirpa et al.'s study corroborates the findings of this study, Mihiretie tended to overemphasize teaching skills over content mastery. This divergence should be taken as a signal of the risk of overvaluing educational and pedagogical issues while neglecting the central role of subject-matter mastery, at least in the context of teaching English as a foreign/second language.

Conclusion

By and large, I have come to understand that the Ethiopian TEFL curriculum is not well-suited to the current educational landscape. It appears to fall short of addressing the main features – the teaching of English, including innovative pedagogical techniques, and the

development of English language proficiency. It may be increasingly difficult to justify continuing with the current approach, as it appears unlikely to yield meaningful improvements in producing English teachers to meet the demands of the 21st-century classroom. The tension between classroom reality and curriculum provision should be resolved through judicious discussion and the re-conceptualization of the TEFL (ELT) curriculum.

Intensive courses that can adequately help us respond to the workplace demands should be incorporated. The list may include English language skills (academic writing, oral communication, etc.), language-teaching methods (teaching/learning skills and debates), technology and language learning/teaching, and language analysis. The instruction model could also incorporate article-driven pedagogy, where learners are required to gather ideas from articles and interpret them within the existing body of knowledge (literature). Repetitious topics should be reduced to prevent learner boredom. Research should consider critiquing language teaching methods and sessions for practical demonstrations.

Universities and English departments should reexamine the relevance of their education for English language teachers and work towards balancing English language proficiency, pedagogical content knowledge, and the integration of technology-enhanced language learning and teaching, including the informed use of Artificial Intelligence. For quality assurance and accreditation bodies, the study highlights the importance of discipline-specific evaluation of curricular provisions and teacher training schemes. I suggest using a constructivist framework in which curricula are designed on the basis of actual needs as manifested in practice. This necessitates sustained dialogue among stakeholders, including students in the programs.

Further research is required to understand these issues better and inform contextually responsive, evidence-based reform in English language teacher education that meaningfully responds to workplace demands. Although this paper highlights several challenges, it is offered in a constructive spirit, and meaningful progress may be achieved through continued professional and institutional dialogue that aims at responding to the demands of the English language teacher education in the 21st century.

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