

Perception of students and English Language teachers towards English Language Instruction: *The case of schools in Sidama Zone, Ethiopia.*

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Abstract

The main objective of the study was to assess the perception of students and English language teachers towards their English language instruction in the schools in Sidama Zone, Ethiopia. It was a descriptive survey which contained 50 English language teachers and 257 students selected through simple random sampling technique from 11 schools. The data gathering tools were questionnaire, interview and document analysis. The results of the study confirmed that though English language teachers have knowledge about the role of teaching English-foreign language status, majority of the English language teachers (70%) in the study area have limited knowledge about language policies, strategies and directions identified in Ethiopian education system. They have also limited access to know different education sector development program frameworks, including General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) plan. Regarding students' perception towards the language, the results disclosed that most of the students (86.4%) confirmed English language is more difficult to learn. Nevertheless, they want to improve their English language skills as it is important to speak English language in different social context. Thus, various organizations should design capacity building trainings to English language teachers not only on language policies and strategies but also on English syllabus and curriculum. In addition, English language teachers should use various techniques to meet the English language needs of the students.

Keywords: Perception, Language instruction, Proficiency, Classroom practice

1. Introduction

The 1994 Education and training policy (ETP) of Ethiopia identified that, English is often used as the medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. On the other hand, obviously, the fact that the process of teaching and learning of the English language is associated with many interrelated social and political uses around the world (Ronald & David, 2001). People's demands toward English in many countries in the world make English language is key factors and became the international language that spreads quickly (Carlo, 2012).

Ethiopia is a country that English language has been taught as a second or foreign language starting from primary schools up to higher educational institutions all over the country. Ethiopia has made significant progress in access at all levels of the education system increased at a rapid rate in line with a sharp increase in the number of teachers, schools and institutions

(MoE, 2010). However, achievements in access have not been accompanied by adequate improvements in quality. Recognizing the fact that, General Education Quality Improvement Package (GEQIP), was launched by ministry of education a few years ago which consists of different programs; among of those; the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) is the one in which it aims at improving the quality of education and competencies of teachers and students in primary and secondary schools all over the country.

The program has been focused on a longer period of in-service training for English subject teachers in primary and secondary schools. Besides this, the 1994 education and training policy issued that, English will be taught as a subject starting from grade one and it will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. The 2006 joint review mission (JRM) identified language policy as a key factor affecting education quality. The national policy is to promote mother tongue teaching in primary education and then introduce English as a subject in grade 1 and as the medium of instruction in secondary education. English is also a medium of instruction starting from grade 5 and it extends up to higher grade levels.

2. Statement of the problem

The study conducted by South Nations and Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) education bureau (2014), on Regional Learning Achievement of students indicated that there is serious deterioration of the student achievement in English language proficiency and the overall performance of students had not improved over the previous years. There are many reasons that cause the students poor performance of their learning English as a foreign language such as the weakness of curriculum design, lack of English teachers, and lack of students' learning motivation. According to John and Ehow (2011), stated that the problems of learning English language derived from many different factors in different environments such as school resources, class size, quality of teachers, and the school attendance of learners. Murray and Christison (2010) observed that many students think English is only a school subject and they don't see its significance for their prospective employment to work with multinational or national companies where English is employed. Susanna (2007) pointed out that the mismatch between the students' conceptual or cognitive capacities and the learners' English proficiency level often cause problems for students because the students' learning style and teachers' teaching approach do not match and also the English course does not relate to the students' needs and interests. In addition, students' perception towards the learning of English language plays a significant role in their success in the English language instruction (Bamlak, 2016)

Susanna (2007) also claimed that weak students usually have poor strategies and give up easily when they find struggle. In addition, many studies have been conducted on students' poor performance in learning the English indicated that English language learning anxiety in students also found that students were afraid of making mistakes in the classes, failing the exams, as well as the poor socio economic background cause of the poor performance in learning languages (Baig, et-al, 2011).

A study conducted on national learning assessment and regional learning assessment on student's learning achievement in English at public schools found that a majority of students have a problem with basic English language skills which influence the overall achievement of the students at primary and secondary level. Hence, this study investigates the determinants and issues of teaching and learning of English language as a foreign language or second language in primary and secondary schools. It also aims to identify the problems and common discourses with the instructional implementation of English language and it also seeks to identify the factors that contribute to low English language proficiency among students in primary and secondary schools of Sidama Zone, Ethiopia.

3. Objectives of the Study

3.1 General Objective.

The main purpose of this study was to assess the perception of students and English language teachers towards their English language proficiency in primary and secondary schools of Sidama Zone, Ethiopia.

3.2. Specific Objectives:

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To assess perception of teachers about their professional competencies and activities.
- To assess perception of students' about the importance of English language in education and different social context.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Research Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level of English language proficiency of students in public primary and secondary schools in Sidama Zone districts. Therefore, descriptive survey method was used as the appropriate design; because, the study was directed towards people, their opinions, attitude and behaviors. This design is also commonly employed to collect detail description of existing educational phenomena with the aim of producing data that justify current condition & practices in educational settings. According to Best and Khan (2006), descriptive research attempts to describe systematically a situation, problem, phenomenon, service or program, or provides information or describes attitudes towards an issue. The method was selected because the nature of the problems needs wider description and detailed analysis of existing phenomenon with the intent of employing data to justify current condition.

4.2 Population of the Study and Sampling Techniques

Target groups of this study were English language teachers, who were working and students who were learning from Grade 7-12, in the schools of Sidama Zone (districts) of SNNPRG in the study period. According to Mouton (1998), the key concept in sampling is representativeness. He has also contended that unless the sample from which we generalize, 'truthfully' or 'faithfully' represents the population from which it was drawn, we have no reason to believe that the population has the same properties as the sample. Thus, to achieve fair representation of sampling, both purposive and random sampling techniques were used to select respondents from the selected schools.

Hence, eleven (11) schools were selected randomly from public primary and secondary schools; from each school, a total of 50 English language teachers and department heads, were selected by random sampling technique. Similarly, 257 primary and secondary school students were selected through random sampling technique.

4.3 Data Collection Tools

4.3.1 Questionnaire

To achieve objectives of the study, a quantitative methodology involving a close-ended questionnaire were used as the measuring tool. Because, the close-ended questionnaires could be administered to groups of people simultaneously since they are less costly and less time consuming than other measuring instruments. In this research, questionnaire was used to obtain quantitative information from teachers on the issues related with English language proficiency of students in public primary and secondary schools of Sidama Zone. As a result, a total of 257 questionnaires were distributed to both teachers and students of eleven (11) primary and secondary schools. During distributing the questionnaires, it was considered that both male and female teachers and students from eleven selected schools had a chance to participate in the

study. Out of the 257 questionnaires distributed to both group of respondents at eleven (11) schools, 257 (100%) were appropriately filled and returned.

4.3.2 Interview

Interview was used by the researcher to get additional data to substantiate the information obtained by questionnaires. Through this part of data collection instrument, the researcher used semi-structured interview question to address 5 English language department heads and 3 English language teachers to investigate the level of English language proficiency of students in public primary and secondary schools of Sidama Zone. The researcher designed an interview to get supplementary information from the respondent.

4.3.3 Document analysis

In order to find the facts in the study area, the researcher analyzed different documents such as students' profiles, mark lists, student's academic records (rosters), regional and national certificate examination result records. The researcher used this method in order to cross-check with the existing facts on the ground.

4.4 Methods of data Analysis

The method of data analysis was based on the nature of the data as there were two kinds of data: quantitative and qualitative.

In analyzing the quantitative data, all the structured items of the questionnaires were keyed into computer and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 17.0 version of computer program. First, the relevant data were coded, summarized, and then transferred in to SPSS for further analysis. Scores of respondents of all items entered into SPSS Version 17.0 software computer program to analysis and compute descriptive statistics. In this study, one sample t-test was used to compute means, standard deviations, and t-value. Frequency analysis and percentage were undertaken to determine number of respondents choose each alternative response to each question. Thus, mean and percentage were used to report statistical values of response of respondents. The statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

The five point likert scale questionnaire items were analyzed in terms of their mean range. The mean scores from "0.01 to 2.99" indicates negative response and disagreement of the respondents on the statements forwarded to them; the mean value "3.00" indicates the neutral response of respondents, and the mean value "3.01-5.00" indicates positive response and agreement of respondents on the issue raised in the items

The other form of data in the study was the qualitative one. It was collected through interview and document analysis. The data was analyzed textually by grouping information thematically from the respondents.

5. Results and Discussions

This part presents the details of data on the teachers and learners' beliefs and perception towards English language and learning English. The textual analysis merged the likert scales, such as 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' as the same category and "Disagree' and 'Strongly disagree' as another similar category. Hence, the data gathered from respondents through questionnaires and interview are presented, analyzed and interpreted as follows.

5.1 EFL Teachers Awareness of General National Policy and strategies of English Language

The respondents were asked to point out their awareness on the national policy and strategies of English language through four items. These are the purpose of English language teaching and learning, their knowledge of the place of English and education sector development programs and their knowledge of English language curriculum and Syllabus in Ethiopian context.

Accordingly, level of knowledge and understanding about the main purpose of teaching & learning English language is as a foreign language in Ethiopian context. As result show, 100% (n=50) of teachers are agreed that they know that the main purpose of teaching & learning English language as a foreign language in Ethiopian context. This shows that all respondents have understanding of the purpose of teaching & learning English as a foreign language in Ethiopian context. However, 70% of teachers confirmed that they did not know the language policies, strategies and directions identified in Ethiopian education and training policy. Likewise, 68% of teachers disclosed that they don't know different education sector development programs, including GEQIP that are being implemented in their schools. Moreover, the table (table 1) clearly signifies that 77% of teachers revealed that they don't know English language curriculum and syllabuses that they are currently teaching in their schools. The same was confirmed by the interview conducted.

Table 1: Perception of Teachers about their Professional Competencies' and Activities

No	Items	Perception of teachers about their professional competencies and activities								
		Frequency and percentage						One sample t-test		
		F/N	SD	D	NS	A	SA	Mean	St.d.	Sig.(2 tailed)
1	I know that the main purpose of teaching & learning English language is, as a foreign language in Ethiopian context.	N	0	0	0	36	14	3.72	1.16	.000
		%	0	0	0	72	28			
2	I know language policies, strategies and directions identified in Ethiopian education policy.	N	11	24	0	11	4	2.46	1.28	0.004
		%	22	48	0	22	8			
3	I know different education sector development program frameworks, including GEQIP plan.	N	16	18	0	12	4	2.40	1.37	0.003
		%	32	36	0	24	8			
4	I know current English language curriculum and syllabuses that I teach.	N	11	25	0	9	5	2.44	1.29	0.004
		%	22	50	0	18	10			

N.B (α = 0.05 at 95% confidence interval of the difference).

The results show that though most of the teachers know the purpose of teaching English as a foreign language in Ethiopian context, they are not familiar with the language policies and strategies, education sector development programs like GEQIP and English language curricula and syllabi at the national level.

Perception towards School and Classroom based Practices

The perception of teachers towards school and classroom practice was measured by items whose basic themes are the practice of CPD (continuous professional development), putting language teaching theories in to practice and considering students' individual differences during organizing classroom lessons.

Table 2: Perception towards School and Classroom based Practices

No	Items	Perception towards School and Classroom based Practices								
		Frequency and percentage						One sample t-test		
		F/N	SD	D	NS	A	SA	Mean	St.d.	Sig.(2 tailed)
5	I am engaged in practicing continuous professional development CPD of teachers.	N	2	17	0	24	7	3.26	1.19	0.129
		%	4	34	0	48	14			
6	I believe that I am putting basic concepts of language theories into practice in my school.	N	11	31	0	8	0	2.84	1.40	0.425
		%	22	62	0	16	0			
7	I am organizing the lesson as my students' background, learning ability and pace.	N	6	28	0	15	1	2.54	1.11	0.005
		%	12	56	0	30	2			

Accordingly, though most of the teachers 62 % of teachers engaged in practicing continuous professional development (CPD) to improve their professional competence, 38% of the respondents were not engaged in the program. But, 58% of respondents said that they are not putting basic concepts of language theories into practice in their school. Similarly, Most of the respondents, 68%, stated that they are not organizing the lesson according to their student's background, learning ability and pace. This, as well as, the data from the document analysis, implies that there is a good beginning of practicing CPD in the schools. Nevertheless, there are gaps in putting theories in to practice and considering students' background in organizing their lessons.

6.3 Perception of students about the importance of English language

To assess perception of students about the importance of English language in the schools, considerable emphasis was given to the importance related to interaction, future success, broadening world view and traveling worldwide.

Table 3: Perception of students about the importance of English language

No	Items	Perception of students about the importance of English language in Broader Context								
		Frequency and percentage						One sample t-test		
		F/N	SD	D	NS	A	SA	Mean	St.d.	Sig.(2 tailed)
1	I believe that, speaking English can help me to interact with those who speak English.	N	7	3	0	82	165	4.53	0.80	.000
		%	2.7	1.2	0	31.9	64.2			
2	I believe that, knowing English is important because it can help me to success in the future.	N	2	1	0	52	202	4.75	0.55	.000
		%	0.8	0.4	0	20.2	78.6			
3	Learning English language is important because it will broaden my world view.	N	4	3	0	41	209	4.74	0.67	.000
		%	1.6	1.2	0	16.0	81.3			
4	If I know English language, I can travel around the world without English language barriers.	N	2	2	0	60	193	4.71	0.58	.000
		%	0.8	0.8	0	23.3	75.1			

N.B ($\alpha = 0.05$ at 95% confidence interval of the difference).

Thus, the results (table 3) revealed almost all respondents underscored the importance of English language to interact with people. Likewise, all respondents confirmed that studying English is significant for success in the future. Furthermore, almost all of respondents that learning English language has a potential to broaden their world view. Finally, all respondents agreed that if they know English language, they can travel around the world without English language barriers. This indicates that there is no perception gap in the students mind about the importance of English language. This result agrees with Dereje (2016) who confirms that students are well aware of the significance of English language in their academic context.

6.4 Perception of students about the Specific importance of English language

The students' perception about the specific value of English language in the context was evaluated through their perception towards the degree of the difficulty, their intention to improve their English language ability, the importance to social and classroom interactional contexts.

Table 4: Perception of students about the Specific importance of English language

No	Items	Perception of students about the specific importance of English language								
		Frequency and percentage						One sample t-test		
		F/N	SD	D	NS	A	SA	Mean	St.d.	Sig.(2 tailed)
5	I believe that, English language is more difficult to learn than other languages.	N	178	44	0	18	17	1.64	1.20	.000
		%	69.3	17.1	0	7.0	6.6			
6	I want to improve my English language utilization skill.	N	6	5	0	57	189	4.62	0.80	.000
		%	2.3	1.9	0	22.2	73.5			
7	I believe that it is important to speak English in different social contexts.	N	8	10	1	80	158	4.43	0.92	.000
		%	3.1	3.9	0.4	31.1	61.5			
8	I believe that teachers and students interaction in English in the class is important because it help me to acquire practical skill directly from them.	N	8	3	0	67	179	4.57	0.83	.000
		%	3.1	1.2	0	26.1	69.6			

The respondents were asked to indicate their beliefs about studying English language is difficult to learn than other languages for students, and almost all, 86.4%, of them disclosed that learning English language is not difficult than learning other languages. Again, the respondents were inquired to point out their level of commitment to improve their English language proficiency. Accordingly, all of them confirmed that they want to improve their English language proficiency. Similarly, almost all, 92.6%, respondents agreed that it is important to speak English in different social context. Finally, concerning their beliefs about the significance of teachers and students interaction in English language in class to acquire practical skill, all of them confirmed that teacher-student interaction in English language in class is important to acquire practical skill directly from their teacher from partner. In line with this, Jamil (2016) disclosed that an interactive classroom gives actual opportunity for language learners to practice more. From this, we can infer that the learners have no any problem related to the general and specific perception on the importance of English language.

6. Conclusions

The main objective of the study was to assess the perception of students and (English as a Foreign Language) EFL teachers towards their English language proficiency in primary and secondary schools in Sidama Zone districts. Accordingly, the study disclosed results based on both forms of objectives: general and specific.

The first specific objective was concerned with EFL teachers' perception about their professional competencies' and activities. In line with this objective, most of EFL teachers confirmed that they know the main purpose of teaching and learning English language is, as a foreign language in Ethiopian context. However, the study equally revealed that majority of the EFL teachers in the study area have limited knowledge about language policies, strategies and directions identified in Ethiopian education system. They have also limited access to know different education sector development program frameworks, including GEQIP plan. Furthermore, teacher respondents are also confirmed that, they didn't have access to know current English language curriculum and syllabuses that they are teaching. The English language teachers indicated that they don't believe that they are putting basic concepts of language theories into practice in their schools since they are not organizing the lesson according to their student's background, learning ability and pace.

The other specific objective is related with perception of students about importance of English language. Results of the study indicated that majority of student believe that speaking English can help them to interact with those who speak English, and they are also believed that knowledge of English language is important because it can help them to success in the future and it can broaden their world view. In addition, majority of student underscored that teachers-student interaction in English in the class is important because it help them to acquire practical speaking skill directly from them. On the contrary, most of the students confirmed that English language is more difficult to learn. Nevertheless, they want to improve their English language skills, and they are also believed that, it is important to speak English language in different social context.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made.

- Since majority of the EFL teachers in the study area have limited knowledge about language policies, strategies and directions, governmental and non-governmental organizations should conduct awareness rising trainings to the teachers. In addition, the documents should be provided to each school so that teachers can access easily.
- Many students confirmed that they believe English language is more difficult to learn. Thus, EFL teachers should conduct English lessons in more interactive and motivating ways so as to arouse their interest since they want to learn the language.

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