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## Exploring Major Impediments in Mastering English by Sanjay Kumar Jha

### Exploring Major Impediments in Mastering English

(The Case of Eastern Ethiopia)

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#### ABSTRACT

English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone immense changes over the years in terms of using different methods, but none of the methods till this date have proved what they had proclaimed. The paper believes in the hypothesis that learning is the part of understanding or knowing the linguistic components of a language, whereas mastering is the part of using them in a well structured way with perfection and ease. Viewing this dichotomy between learning and mastering, the paper examines a problematic discourse: *English in Eastern Ethiopia is often learnt; but not mastered*. In this pursuit, the paper sets an objective of exploring the impeding factors in the process of mastering English. By employing three methods of data collection: (participant observation, unstructured interview, and document analysis) and analyzing the data through *analytic induction*, the research finds seventeen linguistic and non-linguistic impediments in learning and mastering English.

#### 1. Introduction

Today, it goes without saying that English has not only become a lingua franca for us globally, but more importantly it has become a language of progress or a key to success in every walk of life. In Ethiopian context, English is being used paradoxically as a foreign language rather than as a second language because average Ethiopians believe that English can never be a crutch to survive in Ethiopian society. At the same time, Ethiopia's need for English language is more intensified as globalisation is the agenda of the time, whereas the 'depressing picture of English language teaching' never improved (Amlaku, 2010). Despite enforcing multilingual education as a part of constitutional amendment in 1994 to embrace regional languages or mother tongues as the medium of instruction (Bogale, 2009), one can evidently see the predominance of English in almost all the regions of Ethiopia in recent years as English is used as a subject from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and thereafter as a medium of instruction in academia. But in most of the eastern parts of Ethiopia, English is still in a state of doldrums



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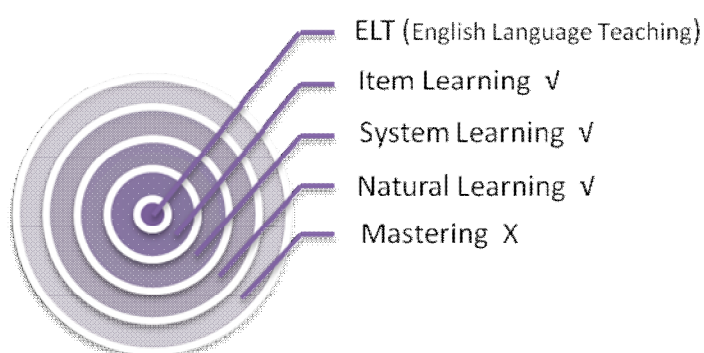
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in terms of practicing it proficiently in academia and public service sectors. Therefore, the paper discusses a problematic discourse that is “*Why English in Eastern Ethiopia is often learnt; but not mastered?*”

The paper believes in the hypothesis that learning is the part of understanding the linguistic components of a language and mastering is the part of using them in a well structured way with perfection and ease. Figuratively speaking, if learning is process, mastering is product; if learning is path, mastering is destination. Simply speaking, the difference between learning and mastering is that of the difference between knowing and using. Mastering is aimed at acquiring expertise in terms of speech fluency, writing accuracy, stylistic nuances, word choice, accent, etc. with utmost perfection.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing importance of English worldwide, an evident fact has strongly been felt in the Ethiopian academia in recent years that ***English language is being often learnt; but not mastered*** by the aspiring learners. English is highly prized as a language which may offer access to higher education and international opportunity; however, it is foreign to most, and is known and used only by a small minority of educated economic and/or political elite in Ethiopia (Bogale, 2009). In spite of acquiring grammatical competence, maximum learners find it difficult to make their acquired knowledge functional in real life situation for lack of mastering the language as illustrated in figure-1 below.



**Figure-1** (Learning vs. Mastering)

The Figure-1 shows ELT in the core, whereas the first, second, third, and the fourth orbit show the diminishing diffusion of ELT in the form of *item learning*, *system learning*, *natural*



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*learning*, and *mastering* respectively. Item learning refers to learning a language at lexical or word level; system learning refers to learning the structure or sentence of the language; natural learning refers to the state in which learner starts learning the language either inductively or deductively using generalization, under-generalization, and over-generalization (Krashen, 1987). Here it is noteworthy that item learning, system learning, and natural learning have been indicated by (√) tick mark which indicates that these levels of learning take place in Ethiopian classrooms, whereas the fourth orbit of mastering phase shows cross mark 'X' which asserts that mastering does not take place in the Ethiopian classrooms. By the time mastering begins, the course duration comes to an end resulting into an incomplete and chaotic learning and mastering. Hence, in its primary attempt, the research conducted a small piloting to know the occurrence of learning and mastering four vital *components* and *skills* of English whose result was disappointing indeed as shown in the following table-1.

	COMPONENTS				SKILLS			
	Vocabulary	Grammar	Structures	Accent	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
LEARNING	+(but faulty)	+	+(not fully)	+/-	+/-	+/-	+	+/-
MASTERING	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table-1 (Occurrence of Learning and Mastering)

In the table above, (+, -, and +/-) stand for (*yes*, *no*, and *mixed state*) respectively. It is noteworthy that *learning* occurs either positively or negatively, but there is no occurrence of *mastering* for the concerned *components* and *skills*. Hence, the paper raises two research questions to explore and ascertain the causes of the absence of mastering as follows.

### 1.2 Research Questions

- Is English being taught in Eastern Ethiopia methodically?
- Why the learners can't move on from learning to mastering phase?

Conforming to the research questions, the paper limits its scope by setting two *objectives* as follows:

### 1.3 Research Objectives

- To carry out a comparative study between ongoing global and Ethiopian ELT methods.
- To explore all the potential linguistic and non-linguistic impediments faced by the learners inside and outside EFL classrooms.



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### 1.4 Research Methodology

The research design is qualitatively exploratory for two main reasons. Firstly, the research has placed great emphasis on the importance of understanding the perspectives of the people in the form of exploring human perception and critical narration of a problematic discourse that is ‘*why English in Eastern Ethiopia is often learnt; but not mastered*’. Secondly, it does not make use of statistical procedures in terms of quantifying the data through measurements, frequencies, scores, and ratings.

Viewing the exploratory nature of the problematic discourse, ethnographic method was adopted for data collection as it requires long-term observations and investigations of the participants mostly from *emic* perspective in which a group of ESL learners’ own learning experience is investigated (McKay, 2008). But the present research took into account *etic* perspective too in which researchers interpret what they see largely from their own perspective in order to correlate and validate the findings.

Three ethnographic data gathering instruments were employed to elicit the data constituting five interdependent motivational variables: (1) *Effectiveness of ELT Methods*, (2) *Ascertaining Levels of Learners*, (3) *Ascertaining Skill(s) to be Learnt*, (4) *Ascertaining the Justness and Ease of the Activities Employed*, and (5) *Pros and Cons of Evaluation* to explore the potential impeding factors in mastering English. The first instrument was *participant observation* by which the researcher directly immersed himself with the participants in the situation (6 EFL classrooms) being studied. This is an effective instrument to enable researchers to assess what their subjects actually do, rather than what they say they do (Bloor & Wood, 2006). The second instrument was *unstructured interview* which was deliberately used as this form of data collection allows the subjects (respondents) to answer freely and the researcher can probe and explore the exact and related problem(s) as they come up during the interview. The third instrument was document analysis which was used not only to triangulate the data and findings drawn from participant observation and unstructured interviews, but more importantly to enhance the credibility, transferability, and validity of the qualitative data. For instance, the reflections of 265 Haramaya university students who responded to a



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qualitative questionnaire in a well documented research made by Jeylan Woliye Hussein (Jeylan, 2010) served as the backbone of the findings mentioned under 4.1 and 4.2 below.

Unstructured interviews were conducted with a considerable size of purposive sample as the subjects were expected to have unique ability to explain, understand, and yield information about the problematic discourse. The elements of purposive sample were 25 undergraduate students (mostly students' representatives), 21 MA students and 15 English teachers of *Haramaya, Dire Dawa, Jijiga Universities*, and Harar secondary school.

As for the method of data analysis, *Analytic Induction* was used to analyze the data as it is a way to develop causal explanations of a phenomenon using inductive reasoning allowing for modifications of concepts to accurately represent the reality of the situation being studied. All the collected data (observed, heard, and read) were firstly classified into two types of thematic categories: *linguistic impediments* and *non-linguistic impediments*; secondly, they were sorted and interpreted based on the degree of emphasis and relativity of the subjects' views.

## 2. Methods of ELT Used Globally

The term ELT is known by different acronyms like TESOL, ESOL, TEFL, etc. but the core concern remains the same that is English language teaching. ELT has undergone immense changes over the years in terms of using different methods (as shown in table-2 below), but the truth is - none of these methods till this date have proved or performed what they had proclaimed (Varshney, 1985) because they are not based on adequate psycho and socio-linguistic needs of the learners. It is forgotten that language is formed and moulded by the unconscious action of the community as a whole rather than compressing the grammar of a language into a set of rigid rules and stuffing them into the heads of the students.

Methods	Year	Methods	Year
1. Grammar Translation Method	(1850s)	9. Audio Visual Method	(1970s)
2. Direct Method	(1890s)	10. Cooperative Learning	(1970s)
3. Audio Lingual Method	(1960s)	11. PPP	(1980s)
4. Community Language Learning	(1970s)	12. Task-Based Approach	(1980s)
5. Silent Way	(1970s)	13. Multiple Intelligences	(1980s)
6. Suggestopedia	(1970s)	14. Natural Approach	(1980s)
7. Total Physical Response	(1970s)	15. Learner Autonomy	(1990s)



8. Communicative Approach	(1970s)	16. Lexical Language Learning	(1990s)
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Table-2 (Methods of ELT used globally)

### 3. Methods of ELT Used in Ethiopia

Prior to commencing the actual research, a pilot study was conducted to observe the application of 16 methods in the EFL classrooms. What came as a surprise was a common and general remark from the participant teachers that they follow learner-centred approach. As a matter of fact, learner-centred approach, which evolved as an offshoot of *Learner Autonomy* and *Multiple Intelligences* in the Ethiopian context, shows a considerable gap between theory and practice of this approach because the students rely heavily on teachers for any activity and are reluctant to develop a sense of responsibility for the outcome of their learning. Viewing this paradoxical stance over using an ELT method like learner-centred approach, a small piloting of 6 EFL classrooms was carried out to know how and which methods were being used by the teachers with respect to 16 aforementioned ELT methods. For the piloting, two variables namely *application* and *degree of application* were used. The first variable namely *application* abbreviated as 'App' was given two attributes (+) and (-) and the second variable namely *degree of application* abbreviated as 'DOA' was given seven temporal attributes in descending degree: {*always, frequently, often, sometimes, seldom, rarely, and never*}. It is noteworthy here that first four attributes i.e. (*Always, Frequently, Often, and Sometimes*) were equated with positive (+) attribute to assert the application of a method, whereas, the last three variables, i.e. (*Seldom, Rarely, and Never*) were equated with the negative attribute (-) to negate the application of a method regardless of their degrees or frequencies. In addition, an attribute 'not familiar' was also added under *degree* to bring out the teachers' unawareness of ELT method(s) as shown in table-3 below.

Methods	App	DOA	Methods	App	DOA
1. Grammar Translation Method	+	Frequently	9. Audio Visual Method	+	Rarely
2. Direct Method	+	Sometimes	10. Cooperative Learning	-	Rarely
3. Audio Lingual Method	+	Sometimes	11. PPP	+	Often
4. Community Language Learning	-	Rarely	12. Task-Based Approach	-	Not familiar
5. Silent Way	-	Seldom	13. Multiple Intelligences	-	Not familiar
6. Suggestopedia	-	Never	14. Natural Approach	-	Not familiar
7. Total Physical Response	+	Sometimes	15. Learner Autonomy	-	Rarely
8. Communicative Approach	+	Often	16. Lexical Language Learning	-	Not familiar

Table-3 (Methods of ELT Used in Ethiopia)



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The table-3 above shows a remarkable fact that maximum teachers are not only deprived of using the effective methods but also unfamiliar with some important methods like Natural Approach, PPP, and Lexical Language Learning. The table also falsifies the claim of practicing *learner centred approach* (Learner Autonomy) as it was found in the observation and textbook analyses that neither the course contents of the prescribed textbooks favour self-learning nor the teachers encourage the learners in a non-stop quest for self learning activities. The results of the applications and their dismal degrees in table-3 also imply that the teachers do not keep themselves abreast of current worldwide research activities and practices in ELT.

### 4. Findings

In its quest for exploring linguistic and non-linguistic impediments in mastering English, ten linguistic and seven non-linguistic impediments were explored as discussed below.

#### 4.1 Linguistic Impediments

Analyzing the data using analytic induction, ten linguistic impediments were found to be the major concern in mastering English.

##### 4.1.1 Faulty Methods

Here, faulty methods have two connotations. The first connotation is *using wrong method(s)* and the second connotation is *using methods wrongly*. 'Using wrong methods' implies here unawareness of applicability and suitability of a particular ELT method for a particular level of learners, whereas 'using methods wrongly' refers to using a method aimlessly without knowing its effectiveness to improve a particular language skill, e.g. listening, speaking, reading, or writing. It was found during unstructured interview and participant observation that average teachers had not only used wrong methods but also used them wrongly. None of the prescribed text-books heed to ensure the correlation between methods and their respective activities to groom different levels of learners to master a particular skill.

##### 4.1.2 Sloppy Curriculum

The curriculum is sloppy for two reasons: (i) the curriculum lacks authentic and interactive lessons for real communication. Even if, the textbook contains some interactive lessons, there is no practice of the same as the teachers focus more on grammar and vocabulary learning; (ii) the course-books are frequently changed fetching complaints from the teachers that they are not aware of the newly introduced modules especially in High Schools of Harari region. As a



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result, not only the teachers are pedagogically less prepared to teach the new course contents but most often it also breaks the continuation and natural hierarchy of course components.

#### **4.1.3 English: a medium of obstruction rather than instruction**

Not to say of active participation in classroom activities, students are often deprived of understanding what they hear from their teachers or read in their textbooks (Bogale, 2009) due to poor proficiency of English on the part of teacher as well as students. One of the chief causes of this conundrum is attributed to *not using English timely and adequately* in the EFL setup. It has been found that English is ignored as a medium of instruction from grade 1 to 8. English becomes medium of instruction from grade 9 and 10 onwards. And worse comes to worst when English is ignored again during the diploma program especially in Oromia region. Students of this region complain of being dismissed from the university because of their incompetence in English. The students can perform well using their first language but not through English medium. Moreover, the students face a huge shortage of reference materials in English medium. In such a state of affairs, it is no longer apt to view English as a medium of instruction; rather it proves more as a medium of obstruction (Stoddart, 1986).

#### **4.1.4 Audio-Visual Teaching Reduced to Nil**

Though, most of the EFL institutions are equipped with language labs but there is almost no use of audio-visual aids or activities for the learners because classroom population is too large to be accommodated in the language labs. In addition, teachers are not technically sound enough to use the labs and make best use of audio-visual aids. As a result, the learners remain deprived of getting adequate training in phonological aspects of English language.

#### **4.1.5 Communicative Incompetence of the Teachers**

Here, communicative incompetence implies teachers' inability of using the language correctly. They lack particularly in areas like word stress, intonation, sentence formation, words choice, stylistic, and cultural nuances of English language. There are moments when, English teachers also hesitate to speak English for fear of making mistakes or being ridiculed.

#### **4.1.6 Pedagogic Incompetence of the Teachers**

The majority of teachers lack the required subject matter knowledge to teach all the five levels of learners for lack of adequate training and proficiency. There are many instructors who pursue their master programs having poor proficiency in English, but they are assigned to teach undergraduate English courses. Such a practice of teaching by novice instructors may only form a chain of incompetent teachers in Ethiopia.





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### **4.1.7 Exam Anxiety and Lack of Performance Based Assessment**

The common practice of assessments is to hold summative tests based on textbook exercises merely to assess learners' theoretical competence in grammar, vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, and writing essays rather than practical performance or usage of the same. Such a mode of exam not only confines the learners to rote learning but also mounts up great anxiety of scoring at least pass marks either by memorizing, cheating, or pestering teachers. Thus the present mode of exam neither measures the progression of learning nor explores learners' areas of weaknesses followed by suggestive feedbacks to overcome them.

### **4.1.8 Lack of English Exposure outside Classroom**

As a matter of fact, a learner needs a speech community to use and diffuse a language. Classrooms normally expose learners to theoretical knowledge base, whereas outside classroom atmosphere exposes learners to the performance or actual usage of the language. There is hardly any exposure of practicing English outside classroom for two chief causes: (1) the average Ethiopians believe that they can easily do away with English as English is not a crutch to survive in Ethiopian society; (2) amid 82 languages and several dialects, the local speakers pay least attention to using English because they heavily use the local languages to establish their linguistic identities.

### **4.1.9 English: Taught as a Subject rather than a Language**

Teaching English for a couple of months as a subject amid loads of other subjects followed by summative tests mounts up immense psychological pressure on the learners. They remain under the state of anxiety for not learning English satisfactorily and for passing English paper at least with pass marks in the given test. So, teaching English like other papers makes both teaching and learning highly artificial depriving the learners of innate and natural learning.

### **4.1.10 Mother Tongue Obsession:**

Today, mother tongue education is emerging as a growing concern in Ethiopian academia. After the amendment in Ethiopian Constitution in 1994, each regional state was given a right to choose, use, and diffuse its languages from both educational and cultural perspectives. To acknowledge the multiethnic character of Ethiopia, mother tongue education was introduced. The introduction of mother tongue education is a precondition to accomplish complete schooling and a basic education for all (Seidel, 2009). From educational perspective, this amendment was intended to make a paradigm shift from the use of only Amharic and English as media of instruction to a system that uses a multi-lingual approach to education. As a



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result, almost all the states expressed their obsession towards mother tongue education which resulted into a trilingual education consisting of mother tongue+Amharic+English (Bogale, 2009). In this proliferation of mother-tongue education, the end users (students) have experienced more harm than good because mother tongue got the highest priority and English got the least priority. The local languages are not only being used as media of instruction but also taught as subjects from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade up to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Seidel, 2009). Such an obsession towards mother tongue often deprives the learners of learning and mastering English.

### **4.2 Non-Linguistic Impediments**

Seven non-linguistic impediments were found as multi-headed hydra as they are seemingly hard to be solved with a single effort due to their persistent and pervasive nature as follows.

#### **4.2.1 Time–Place-Manpower Constraints**

The shortage of time, place, and manpower are intertwined due to large number of students. According to international standard, the ideal number of students in an EFL classroom of (15x20 feet) size is 15 to 30 students. According to Hayes (1997), the ideal size of language class is 30 at most, because only under such a scale can offer enough chances for the students to communicate with each other. If we maintain this size and number of students for closer attention, it requires more periods of teaching. More periods of teaching require more manpower which is not available especially in Haramaya and Dire Dawa University. If we increase the classroom size, the number of students will increase. If the number of students increases, teaching, learning, and overall interaction are affected adversely.

#### **4.2.2 Teachers' Comfort**

Most of the teachers show lackadaisical attitude in setting exam papers if the number of students exceeds 100 as it requires more amount of time in correcting exam papers. For instance, writing-test and subjective questions are almost excluded from the final exam and MCQ (multiple choice questions) or objective type questions are instead set as they are easier to be corrected by anyone in lesser amount of time with the help of keys. Ironically, writing-test is often given as classroom activities to elapse the lecture duration; or as home assignment which is arguable whether the assignment is prepared by the students or others. Besides, students often complain of teachers' reluctance in correcting their faulty write-up.

#### **4.2.3 Ego War among Teachers**

The issue of ego war among teachers severely affects the teaching-learning process which can



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be experienced in many EFL setup. The ego war mainly arises out of age supremacy, designation supremacy, and knowledge supremacy of teachers. Senior teachers undermine juniors and junior teachers do not like to be dictated or influenced by the seniors. Such a difference results into ego war which takes the form of prolonged differences among the colleagues. Moreover, low performing teachers develop an inferiority complex that gives birth to the formation of like-minded group posing a potential threat to the growth of EFL setup.

#### **4.2.4 Low Reward Causing Reluctance to Teach**

Some English teachers show reluctance in teaching English as they feel that financially they are not well rewarded. This fact came to light during unstructured interviews with some instructors when they said sarcastically that “If they are rewarded like expatriates, they will teach 24 hours a day”. Though this statement sounded humorous but it had an outburst of dissatisfaction due to low reward compared to their counterpart expatriate colleagues.

#### **4.2.5 Disrespect towards Teaching Profession**

Due to low remuneration, teaching is not preferred as a noble profession in Ethiopia. Teaching is taken as a last resort by many young English teachers. They are more ambitious of becoming medical professionals or engineers but not teachers. The majority of teachers were found to be more concerned with improving their own English to compete for better jobs in other sectors rather than grooming the English of their students.

#### **4.2.6 Alien Control of EFL Classroom**

The phrase “**Alien Control of EFL Classroom**”, refers specifically to external control of the EFL classroom by super-imposed committee (as found in the secondary schools of Harari region) which does not have any active role in teaching but it monopolizes the entire examination activities by setting question papers for both mid-term and final exams of grade 9 and 10. The concerned teachers are mum over the issue in the hope that Ministry of Education (MOE) will look into the matter some day and do the needful.

#### **4.2.7 Lack of Motivation and Professional Vision**

Lack of motivation was seen in the temperament of both students and teachers. They believe that English can never be the second language to satisfy the daily needs to survive in the



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Ethiopian society or speech community. They feel that English should be used only within the four walls of classroom or in compelling situations. It reflects either they are ignorant of the importance of English or they willingly undermine the importance of English. In addition, lack of professional vision was also found as there is no focus on business communication in the prescribed curriculum to groom students to be an efficient communicator at workplace.

### **5. Conclusion**

In its heuristic efforts, the paper has adhered to answering its two research questions and attaining its two conforming objectives in a precise though somewhat candid manner. Based on the findings, two conclusive remarks are apt to be made here. Firstly, English, in the Ethiopian context, is being taught and learnt more often as a subject rather than as a language because learners' knowledge is processed often within the four walls of classroom driven by sloppy curriculum and faulty methods. Hence, English should not only be used as a medium of instruction from grade-1 but also as a medium of communication right from the early age because our memory and motor skills begin to decline after the age of 15 (Gary, 2001). Secondly, neither students nor teachers are motivated to excel in terms of mastering the language due to many-headed hydra like *low reward causing reluctance to teach, mother tongue obsession, teacher's comfort, ego war among teachers*, etc. Thus, the time is ripe to introspect as well as retrospect over the existing linguistic and non-linguistic impediments from wider perspective and find holistic solutions of the same at the earliest.

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