

The effect of primary English readers
on reading skills in Ethiopia

(A study in African educational needs)

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
Litterarum in English in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria,
PRETORIA

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October 2003

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the young students of Ethiopia, who must learn to read effectively and succeed not only in their education, but also in improving our country and in making it a better place to live in, despite the odds.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisors Professor Stephen M. Finn and Professor Peter Titlestad for their continuous support, useful advice and meticulous reviewing of my thesis. They both went well beyond the call of duty by taking time out from conferences for consultations and assisted me in administrative and financial issues caused by the distance between Pretoria and Addis.

Next, I am indebted to all the school administrators, teachers and students, who wholeheartedly sacrificed their precious time and energy to get involved in my research.

Finally, I must thank all my family and friends, who directly contributed to this work, through providing me with materials, encouragement, comments and assistance. In particular, I would like to thank my mother, Barbara Daniel, and my friends Elisabeth Ayalew, Emebet Mulugeta, Samuel TesfaMichael and Tedla Haile for proof-reading and commenting on my chapters. Solomon Tewelde and Kari-Ann Whitbread were a real help in transferring money, while Amb. Doutoum, Dr Abiye and Dr Almaz were constantly encouraging. I will always be grateful to my wife, Fassikawit Ayalew, for being so supportive, even when I grew grumpy. She unhesitatingly co-operated in all financial matters like fees, airfares and whatever expenses were involved, though they necessitated her to forfeit other requirements. Last and definitely not least, I have to acknowledge my baby boy, Beruk, whose mischievous glances and irresistible smiles at my disorderly papers gave me the impetus to quickly finish my dissertation before he lay his chubby little hands on them.

Abstract

For years the quality of Ethiopian education has been lamented over and some have warned of the crises of running an inefficient educational system and its detrimental effects on nation building (Tekeste 1990:84). One of the factors in the students' inability to benefit from their lessons is their lack of reading skills. The Ethiopian Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) is calling for the introduction of supplementary readers to reinforce the learning of English at primary level. In response, many organisations such as The British Council, CODE, Emmanuel Home and PLAN International are providing primary schools with readers. A case in point is the Primary Readers Scheme of the British Council.

This thesis examines if there is any tangible effect on the students' reading skills by conducting a comparative study between two government schools that received a donation of primary readers and two schools that did not. To begin with a short review of the suitability of the readers selected by the teachers after an initial pilot scheme is made. Then 454 students were tested in this evaluation to check if there had been a significant improvement in the reading skills of the students in the school that received donations of supplementary readers.

It was found that there has been no significant increase in the students' reading abilities. This is not because there is a weakness in modern theories that preach the usefulness of supplementary readers but because government schools lack the capacity to utilise supplementary readers. Most of the librarians are not qualified, while the teachers, though

qualified, lack training in how to use supplementary readers and also tend to be demotivated. Moreover, the administration and running of most of the schools libraries do not allow first cycle students (Grade 1-4) to use the libraries and prohibit second cycle students (Grades 5-8) from borrowing books, thereby limiting the books' accessibility. It is also very likely that the country's socio-economic situation in general and the children's backgrounds do not encourage the habit of reading for pleasure. Consequently, the Education Sector Development Program will have to make some modifications to maximise the benefits of extensive reading in the future, such as training teachers and librarians as well as encouraging supplementary reading amongst the students.

The study concludes that though extensive reading schemes produce impressive results in experimental situations, care should be taken in actual implementation of such schemes in real life. Efforts must be made to ensure the actual delivery of appropriate supplementary readers selected by the students themselves to the schools. Moreover, other important and related aspects including good school administration of libraries, training of teachers, a sustainable supply of books and most of all project monitoring and evaluation should be given due consideration.

Glossary of Keywords

1. **Acquisitionally Poor Environment** = a surrounding that is not conducive to the learning of a language due to its being rarely used in both speech and print.
2. **Componential Model** = A model that describes by identifying various components.
3. **Cultural Appropriateness** = something that coincides with the norms, values and thinking patterns of a society or group of people.
4. **Extensive Reading** = Fast reading that is necessarily done in large quantities with a focus on content to get pleasure or information rather than on language.
5. **Minimal Linguistic Threshold** = a basic knowledge of a language necessary for transferring knowledge from the mother tongue to the target language.
6. **Optimum Reading Age** = The time when a child is most receptive to learning reading skills.
7. **Reading** = the process in which a student interacts with a written text and derives meaning, which can be exhibited in a manner appropriate to the demands of the teacher/researcher.
8. **Readers** = Storybooks provided to students for additional reading outside the curricula to improve their reading skills.
9. **Reading Level** = A range of vocabulary and proficiency skills a student can be categorised into.
10. **Process Model** = A model that describes the interaction of components.

Introduction

Africa's socio-economic realities place her in a unique position. As a result, programmes and projects that are successful in the world do not necessarily work in Africa. Cognisant of this fact, a World Bank report on education in Sub-Saharan countries reads: “ It is difficult to generalise about what will ensure high quality education because the factors determining effectiveness in education are so complexly interwoven and dependent on local context” (Heneveld and Craig: 1996:xii). The report explains that research and data about education are based on the realities of developed countries. “If that information is to be put usefully to work to design interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, it has to be informed by the experience of African educators, and the only providers of this experiential expertise are Africans themselves.” (Heneveld and Craig: 1996: 48).

Therefore, as Ethiopia is in the process of implementing an education sector programme, it is imperative that all projects and the entire programme is monitored and evaluated to ensure its effectiveness at the local level. Martin, Oksanen and Takala (2000:2) also reiterate the need for independent people to carry out more objective evaluations and ensure that the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) is indeed meeting its set objectives.

This thesis is based on the premise that independent researchers can contribute to the evaluation process, and attempts to measure the effectiveness of the provision of supplementary readers to primary schools with the intent of improving the students' reading skills in English.

Durand and Deehy (1996:163) state:

Conducted properly, evaluations provide valuable feedback to all involved in the book donation process, from the donating publishers to the donor agencies and the recipients. The evaluation results, both positive and negative, can be used to improve the overall process of the book donation and to meet the specific – and changing – needs in each country.

Although previous research in other countries, such as that done by Davis, (1995), Elley (1991), Hamp-Lyons (1985), Krashen (1993), Nation (1997), has proved unambiguously that the provision of readers has a direct and positive impact on the reading skills of students, this has not yet been proved in Ethiopia. Moreover, a lot of evaluative research tends to be conducted in well-controlled laboratory-like conditions. Although it would probably be fairly easy to take a group of Ethiopian students and run them through an extensive reading programme and show that their reading skills have improved, this would not give a good picture of the reality on the ground. Context-sensitivity can only be regulated and modified, if evaluative research is carried out on real life projects that have taken place with the interference of all the complexities of real life, rather than studying an artificial project tested in an artificially sterile environment. Critics of academic research tend to neglect work by saying it is like trying to measure the effects of a grain of salt on the taste of a stew. In order to accommodate such criticism, yet not drown in the cauldron of stew, a more inclusive review of general related factors has been attempted. It tends to sample a ladle of the stew, which hopefully will be representative of it.

The study sets out with two hypotheses. Hypothesis One is that the provision of supplementary readers to primary schools has produced a statistically significant

improvement in the reading skills of the students and the Null Hypothesis is that there is no significant relationship between the reading skills of the students and the provision of the supplementary readers. In proving or disproving these hypotheses, it pays particular attention to what sort of utilisation capacity government owned primary schools in Addis Ababa have, and possible implications for the effective implementation of the Education Sector Development Program. It is considered as relevant because a recent study of twenty-six education projects came up with the finding that “the closer the factor was to the life of the school and to what touches the children directly, the less likely it was to be planned for explicitly in these projects assisted by the World Bank” (Heneveld and Craig: 1996: 40). The report ends up by recommending that for the future, greater focus should be given to what actually happens inside the school as well as a richer package of considerations of what makes education effective (Heneveld and Craig: 1996:53). This is important in that academic research often takes place in controlled situations where facilities are abundant and motivation is high. In real life school settings, however, things tend to be less than ideal and teaching takes place in an environment in which demotivation, shortages of facilities and other factors all impact on the teaching/learning process.

The writer of this thesis has had over a decade of experience working in in-service and pre-service teacher training. He was involved in several supplementary reading schemes and has experience in inspecting regions implementing the ESDP. Consequently, the request for further research for the expertise of African educators to do their share, has made the selection of this topic a foregone conclusion.

As the thesis is aimed at an international audience, who probably are not very familiar with the Ethiopian situation and context, the first chapter gives some background knowledge, which is a prerequisite to understanding the situation on the ground. Chapter One describes the background of education in Ethiopia and the foundations for the whole thesis. A general overview of Ethiopia and its historical background and language situation is given. This is followed by a description of the Ethiopian education system and language policy relating this to the media of instruction at primary level and the role of English in the system. Finally, the current Education Sector Development Program is discussed.

Chapter Two moves on to the issue under focus, which is reading in Grade Eight. It scrutinises reading at the second cycle of primary education. In the first part, a broad view of the role of reading in English in the system will be given. This is done by looking at learning materials in Ethiopia, including the reading passages used in the Grade Eight English Textbook. and the Grade Eight National English Examination of 2000. In addition, the reading syllabi drawn up by the Institute of Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR) is looked into. Issues such as what reading actually is and general approaches to viewing and teaching reading are covered here. Most significantly perhaps the Primary Reader Scheme, which provided the supplementary readers whose effects this study is trying to evaluate, is discussed in detail. A brief description of the readers provided by the scheme is given. This is followed by an analysis of the suitability of the readers selected by the teachers as favourites, after a one-year pilot testing of the scheme.

Chapter Three reviews the literature on reading and gives reviews of Ethiopian research on reading and international research on extensive reading. Moreover, it provides the rationale behind using children's literature and aspects to consider, while running extensive reading schemes for students.

Chapter Four gets down to the actual research design, subjects and techniques of evaluation. The aims and objectives of the study are explained. Moreover, the region in which the study is carried out and a description of the schools and students is provided. Then the methodology used and the selection of tests and questionnaires, as well as the method of analysing the data are all justified with references to current literature on the subject. The administrative procedure is discussed and the relevant levels of significance set. Finally, the delimitations of the study are explained.

Chapter Five contains the findings and analysis. The chapter states the findings and analyses them in the light of observations made during school visits and the general ESDP context. The students' results in the EPER placement test are examined and the general reading levels of the students commented upon. Then follows the statistical descriptions and inferential analysis. After this, the questionnaires and observations are discussed. As the study set out to find out about the capacity of government owned schools to utilise supplementary readers, as well as to uncover facts for the ESDP, implications from the tests, questionnaires and observations are discussed in relation to the findings.

The last chapter is Chapter Six, in which there is a general summary and recommendations from the study. The recommendations attempt to address both specific issues concerned

with running extensive reading schemes as well as broader issues of school administration. The appendices and references following this chapter, can also provide useful information for anyone interested in reading in the areas or getting more specific information on individual scores, results, the EPER test and the like.