

2. Chapter Two: Reading in the Primary Cycle of Ethiopian Education

Based on the foundations laid in Chapter One, this chapter intends to scrutinise reading at the primary level of the Ethiopian education system with special emphasis on the last year of the second cycle primary education. First the very concept of reading will be examined. A working definition of reading will be attempted. It will define the various skills involved in reading and the basic approaches and trends in reading theory over the years will be explored. Then a broad view of the role of reading in English in the system will be given. This will be followed by a look at learning materials in Ethiopia. After that a description and an explanation of the Primary Reader Scheme and attempts to evaluate it will be discussed. Next, an analysis of the reading syllabi drawn up by the ICDR along with the reading passages used in the Grade Eight English Textbook will be given. Finally the Grade Eight National English Examination of 2000 will be described.

2.1 What is Reading? Basic Definitions

Reading is a notoriously difficult concept to define as it is an ‘omnibus’ skill involving lower and higher order skills and includes psychological, educational and sociological aspects. There is a lot of controversy over definitions of reading by scholars as each defines it according to the purpose of their study with a slant towards the language process or the thought process.

Some see it in general blocks. Spink (1989:44) sees it as a process involving the perception of the words, the comprehension of the text, a reaction to what is read and a fusion of old and new ideas. Taylor and Taylor (1983: 24-26) see reading as a continuum

with the four major signposts of letter and word recognition, sentence reading, story reading and reading for its own sake.

Greenall and Swan (1986:53) prefer to break it down into smaller skills such as extracting main ideas, reading for specific information, understanding text organisation, predicting, checking comprehension, inferring, dealing with unfamiliar words, linking words, understanding complex sentences, understanding writers' styles, evaluating the text and reacting to a text. Similarly, Clay (1972:76) also breaks it down into small but different skills involving directional control, left to right, recognition vocabulary, prediction, self correction, knowing probabilities of occurrence, auditory memory, search for cues in text, picture interpretation, fluent oral language, letter sound analysis, syllabification and clusters, little words in bigger words, visual analysis by analogy, syntactic and semantic context, inference and others.

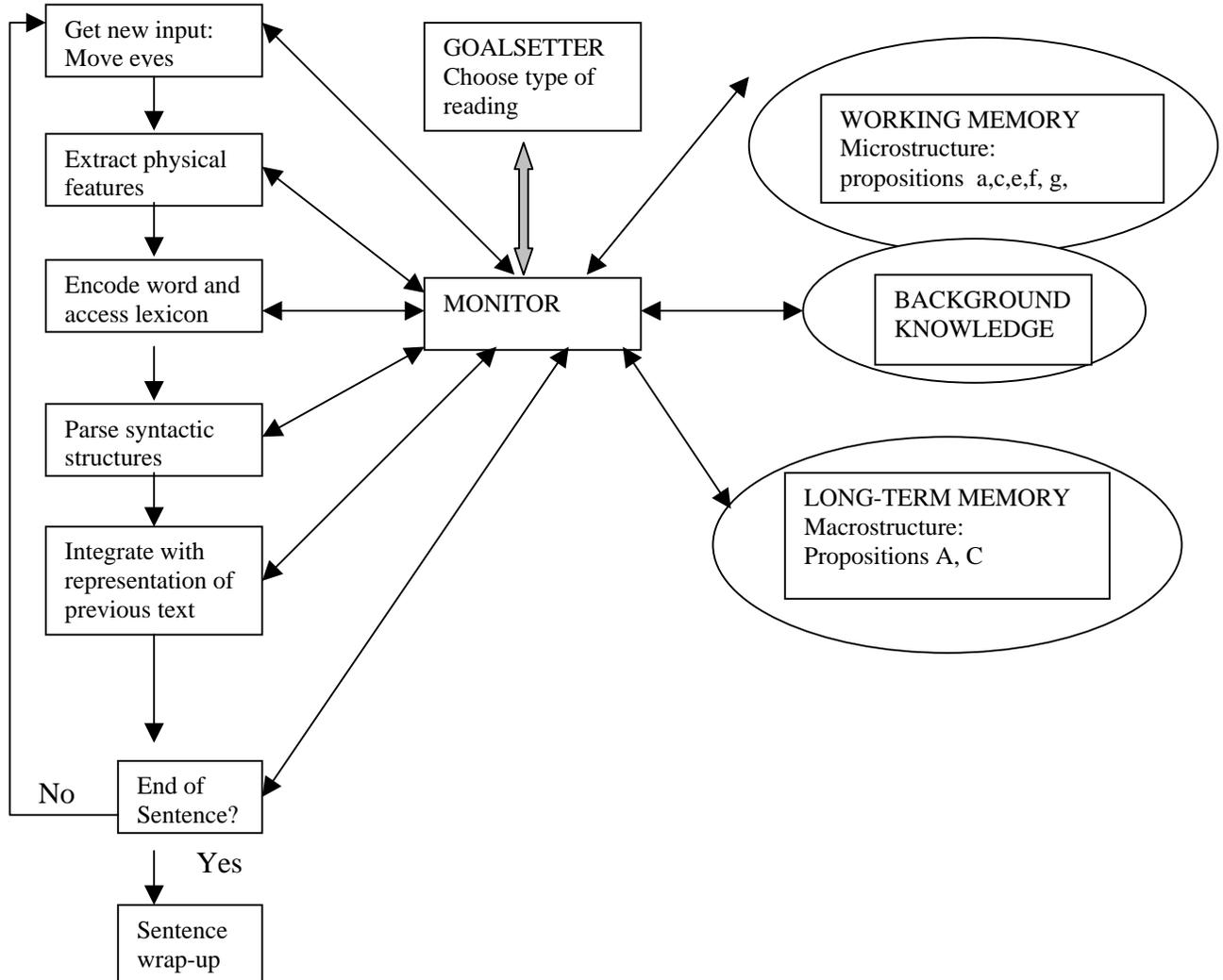
Two general categories into which all these definitions fall have been labelled as "Componential Models" and "Process Models" (Urquhart and Weir, 1998: 39). Componential models, as the name suggests, breaks up the construct of reading into its various components. The components can be as small as the description of a fixation, or the amount of seconds an eye pauses on a group of words, or as encompassing as the terms "skills" and "strategies", which themselves are made up of numerous components like skimming, scanning and others. Componential Models restrict themselves to descriptive behaviour and do not in any way attempt to speculate on how these components tend to correlate, be it in terms of importance, priority or centrality. Perhaps

the definition of reading from a componential point of view is defining it as an “omnibus” skill composed of many smaller skills is the best description. However, this description leaves us with the same question of what smaller skills are involved.

The second category for the descriptions is the “Process Model” definition, which courageously attempts to describe how the various components interact. These definitions will be discussed later on under the sub-title “General Approaches to Viewing and Teaching Reading”.

For now it will suffice to give an example, which Urquhart and Weir (1998:106) adapt from the Just and Carpenter model.

Figure 1: A Model of the Various Components of Reading



This model attempts to take the various components, such as getting in-put from the text and set it as a prerequisite to extracting physical features. Although it works at this level, it fails to show how a reader with prior expectations and another without expectations would approach the same text.

Obviously, all of the above classifications could prove useful, depending on the type of uses a researcher wants to put reading to. If one were to break down the various skills in reading, an endless list could be drawn up. At a mechanical level, the eyes briefly fix themselves on a group of words or a single word, then jerk on to another group after approximately a quarter of a second. It is assumed that one first has to perceive letters, normally with the eyes or with the fingers in the case of braille. Then one has to be able to identify the letters with a previously studied alphabet and associate the letters with phonemes or sounds of the language. Then one has to relate the letter combinations with words. However, at an early stage and even later on, a good reader would identify the whole word and might even correct miss-spelt words in his head. Developing a rich stock of vocabulary is obviously an invaluable asset in identifying words. Then the cluster of words must be associated with previously learnt structures in what may be called grammatically correct sentences. This whole sentence is then processed at a higher level, which is more mental than mechanical. The brain processes the visual information obtained from the eyes along with non-visual information retrieved from the brain. This involves deriving meaning from the combination of words, which the reader proceeds to do from previous knowledge, experience, expectations and clues derived from the text. This involves being familiar with the text layout, style, tone and mood. It involves mental skills like comparing and contrasting, evaluating, summarising and analysing. A good reader will have a range of reading skills and techniques including skimming, scanning, reading intensively and extensively and predicting what the text is about. Although the brain processes visual information at a maximum speed of 60 words per minute, the

amount of non-verbal information that can be processed is not limited. Therefore, readers tend to vary in their rate of processing the information rather than in their intake of visual information. Urquhart and Weir (1998:90) give a selection of typical taxonomies as follows:

1. Davies (1968):
 - Identifying word meanings.
 - Drawing inferences
 - Identifying writer's technique and recognising the mood of the passage.
 - Finding answers to questions
2. Lunzer et al. (1979):
 - Word meaning
 - Words in context.
 - Literal comprehension.
 - Drawing inferences from single strings.
 - Drawing inferences from multiple strings.
 - Interpretation of metaphor.
 - Finding salient or main ideas.
 - Forming judgements
3. Munby (1978)
 - Recognising the script of a language
 - Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items.
 - Understanding explicitly stated information.
 - Understanding information when not explicitly stated.
 - Understanding conceptual meaning.
 - Understanding the communicative value of sentences.
 - Understanding relations within the sentence.
 - Understanding relations between parts of texts through lexical cohesion devices.
 - Interpreting text by going outside it.
 - Recognising indicators in discourse.
 - Identifying the main point of information in discourse.
 - Distinguishing the main idea from detail.
 - Extracting salient points to summarise (the text, an idea)
 - Selective extraction of relevant points from a text.
 - Basic reference skills.
 - Skimming.
 - Scanning to locate specifically required information.
 - Transcoding information to diagrammatic display.

4. Grabe (1991:377)
 - Automatic recognition skills.
 - Vocabulary and structural knowledge.
 - Formal discourse structure knowledge.
 - Content/world background knowledge.
 - Synthesis and evaluation skills.
 - Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring.

The question of what reading actually is would appear superfluous, had it not been for the fact that nobody has been able to define reading exhaustively to date. Urquhart and Weir (1998:13) declare:

We all know what reading is. And many of us have suffered, at some time or another, from the type of bore who stops any argument or discussion with ‘Ah, it depends on what you mean by ...’. So it is with some reluctance that we begin this part with an attempt to define reading, to say what we mean by the term. Our excuse is that people do use the term in different ways, and that while this may be permissible when everybody is conscious of the differences, on occasion it can cause real confusion and difficulty.

Without beleaguering the point it might be necessary at this stage to look quickly at what reading can be to various researchers and conclude with a working definition for this study.

Most researchers would agree that a written text would be the starting point for reading to take place and it would involve at least one person. From this basic premise a multitude of definitions could arise depending on the context, time and purpose for defining reading. Gerot (2000:205) rightly points out that myriad answers could be given to the simple question of what reading actually is.

In olden days, deacons or priests had to read out loud the sacred words from a holy book. The actual saying of words aloud, even if they were in a dead language, which the person did not understand, was generally accepted as reading. The comprehension of the meaning of the words was not considered essential except for the more enlightened leaders of the

religion. Modern researchers like Urquhart and Weir (1998:17) do not accept this as reading and prefer to refer to it as “barking at print.”

The interaction of reader and text leading to the creation of meaning tends to lie at the core of most definition nowadays. Admittedly, the amount of meaning in the text and the amount of meaning brought to the text by the reader is open to discussion and obviously differs from text to text, as can easily be appreciated in the differences between reading a manual of instructions and reading an artistic poem. Urquhart and Weir (1998:22) avoid this debate by simply defining reading as “*the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print*” and defend their definition by adding, “This may not be very neat but it suits our purposes.”

Gerot (2000:204) tends to give a more exhaustive definition by repeating and expanding on the definition she used in her MA thesis and ends up by saying:

The reading process inherently involves the interaction of a reader and a text. Here the reader is considered first and foremost to be a language user and the text is considered to be an instance of language in use. This implies that the reader, through her linguistic ability, is capable of ascribing meaning to and interpreting from a text. As a person reads a text, she responds not only to the meanings mapped onto the linguistic elements, but also takes into account the sociocultural context which is reconstituted through the language patterns. In so doing, she takes into account all she knows about what is going on, what part language is playing, and who are involved.

This definition tends to be one of the most exhaustive, as it includes background knowledge, reading skills and text. It could account for the variety of responses that various readers from different countries would demonstrate to a headline reading, “Osama bin

Laden: America’s Most Wanted Man,” in light of the September attacks on the World Trade Center.

Nevertheless, from an educational point of view, reading cannot be considered to have taken place, unless the student is able to demonstrate to the teacher that he has gained some sort of insight or meaning from having read a text. His response could be through doing a task, answering a question or in any form that the teacher demands and should usually be in accordance with the expectations of the teacher. Consequently, due to the necessity of monitoring and evaluating the students’ reading ability, “reading” cannot practically be defined in education without an accompanying response or verifiable indicator, which the teacher accepts as an adequate measure that reflects the students’ comprehension of the text.

For the purpose of this study reading can be defined as *the process in which a student interacts with a written text and derives meaning, which he is able to exhibit in a manner appropriate to the demands of the teacher/researcher.*

2.2 General Approaches to Teaching Reading

Over the years, there has been different emphasis on the various aspects of reading and this in turn has determined the approach scholars have used to study reading. To describe reading, some researchers have attempted to describe the various factors that are involved, while others have tried to describe models and approaches that could contribute to our understanding. “Componential models” are of the former type that try to describe the skills

or components involved in reading, while “process models” attempt to go one step further and come up with postulations as to how these components interact.

Parker and Parker (1984:179) describe the general approaches to the teaching of reading in school.

The first approach they describe, reflects “the sequential mastery of a set of discrete phonic rules.” This approach aims at a step by step mastery of individual items of the language, with the ultimate aim of a comprehensive mastery of reading as a whole.

The second approach basically reflects a behaviouristic theory, whereby words, sentences and sounds are drilled into the reader by their repeated and artificial reoccurrence in a text. At times, these books are reinforced by the teacher pre-teaching words and structures with the use of flashcards and colour-coded workcards. The carefully sequenced stories drilled the students with what were considered as the basics of reading. Gerot is against the whole notion that regularly patterned words embedded in stories can contribute to the students’ language development. She (2000:207) complains, “...behaviouristic psychological views of reading ... more than twenty years on and despite current curriculum documents, remain in the folklore of teaching.”

The last approach discussed is the use of children’s literature as the basis of reading programmes. Williams (1984:203) points out that this area has not received the attention of research that it deserves especially in the field of English as a second or foreign

language. This approach sees reading for enjoyment as the basic instrument of increasing students' reading proficiency. It advocates less teacher control and greater independence for the students to do their own reading. Williams (1984:203) stresses that “An important mechanism for learning a language appears to be one of hypothesis forming and testing, or ‘creative construction’”. Consequently, it is vital that speakers of English as a second or foreign language have adequate input of the target language to form and test their own hypothesis. The basic approaches used in process models towards examining and describing reading can be described in terms of a bottom up, top down and interactive. Urquhart and Weir (1998:39) rightly point out:

The popular view of the development of process models, which turns up in many article introductions and innumerable PhDs, goes roughly as follows. First of all came the bottom-up approach, which was then replaced by the top-down model, which in turn was replaced by interactive models. In fact, the most frequently cited example of a bottom-up model, that of Gough, was published in 1972, whereas the corresponding most frequently cited example of a so-called top-down theory, that of Goodman, was first published in 1967.

Nevertheless, despite their valid distinction about the dates the theories were written and published, the approaches will be described in the traditional manner. This is because even though Goodman might have described reading as “ a psycholinguistic guessing game”, while Gough was still looking at texts, the traditional ways of teaching reading reflected the underlying rationales.

2.2.1 A Bottom Up Approach

As just mentioned, the traditional approach to reading reflected a bottom up approach. In ancient times, scripts were very scarce. Scribes and holy men wrote down on parchment

and papyrus, secret chants, prayers and recipes. In addition to this, the ignorance of people led them to believe that secret power and forces were stored in the words themselves. This attitude led people to believe in curses, spells and the like. One's name was thought to hold the key to one's essence and would not be told to many. The reader was seen as a medium through which the words in a text released themselves. So prayers had to be recited in 'original' languages such as Geez, Sanskrit or Classical Arabic. Literary texts were almost worshipped and memorised recitals of a text were encouraged.

The most prevalent traditional view on reading portrayed the task of reading as the extraction of a certain piece of information from a written text. Carrell (1988:1-2) explains:

... a rather passive, bottom-up, view of second language reading; that is, it was viewed primarily as a decoding process of reconstructing the author's intended meaning via recognizing the printed letters and words, and building up a meaning for a text from the smallest textual units at the "bottom"...

This view demonstrates quite well that the sort of reading used to follow instructions in the assembling of a machine. In such instructions there can be only one correct interpretation of the written words. Visual information tended to be seen as the sole factor that influences reading, so various readers were expected to come up with identical interpretations of a given text. The reader was simply seen as a passive decoder and hence the expression of a 'bottom up approach', in which the meaning was in the bottom (text) and the top (reader) decoded it. Any variations in interpretations were seen as defects in decoding rather than legitimate differences.

Although the capacity to follow an argument in a text is an important skill of reading, the shortcomings of such an approach were evident in the reading of narratives, particularly poetry. This is because poetry tends to use many loaded words. Consequently, the fact that different readers came up with different responses that they could equally justify and rationalise led to the need to reassess the assumptions about and the approach to reading. However, such a reassessment came about very gradually, and for a long time what a text meant was decided by ‘an authority’ on the subject. This was especially so in several fields of the social sciences, where respected economists, philosophers and historians usually had the final say. In literature classes, students were taught to study and reproduced ‘informed assessments’ of critics in literature classrooms. Maxwell and Meiser (1997:185) put it in a nutshell by saying, “Most of us have had the experience of thinking that we have understood a text only to be told that we were mistaken. What the story or poem really meant – the right meaning – was what an authority claimed.”

Day and Bamford (2000:1) state “Traditional approaches and classroom practices, with their focus on translating, answering comprehension questions, or practising skills such as finding main ideas, tend to ignore the larger context of student attitudes towards reading and their motivation to read.”

Urquhart and Weir (1998: 40-41) prefer to call this a “text-driven” approach. They explain that different researchers divided up the reading process into letter and word identification, followed by the assigning of meaning through syntactic and semantic rules. The fact that the whole process commences with the letters and words or the “text”

leads them to argue that “text-driven” is more appropriate than “bottom-up”, which might have unpleasant associations with pubs. Whatever, title might be chosen, such a linear sequential description of components and process failed to deal with the complex reality of reading.

Unfortunately, as so often happens in human history, one extreme gave way to its opposite extreme and a top down approach was briefly adopted. Urquhart and Weir (1998: 42-43) predictably prefer the term “reader-driven”.

2.2.2 A Top Down Approach

With this approach researchers became highly interested in what went on ‘behind the eyes’. Much attention was paid to schemata, cultural familiarity and individuality. The capacity of readers to process texts through various skills was scrutinised. Carrell (1988:2-3) defines a top-down approach by saying:

The reader reconstructs meaning from written language by using the graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic systems of language, but he or she merely uses cues from these three levels of language to predict meaning, and, most important, confirms those predictions by relating them to his or her past experiences and knowledge of the language.

Interestingly, the Ethiopian traditional church seems to have encountered difficulties with their students’ short-term and long-term memory and developed a memory-enhancing drug from traditional plants and herbs.

Silberstein (1987:30) states “The reader is seen as an active, planning decision-making individual who co-ordinates a number of skills and strategies to facilitate comprehension

... The reader brings to the task a formidable array of information and ideas, attitudes and beliefs.” For instance, simply reading about a wedding ceremony will bring to the mind of different readers the food, drinks and costumes that they are familiar with in their own culture. Infidelity and polygamous acts by characters in stories will also be viewed in light of the cultural norms of the reader. So each reader will be interpreting from the text in his/her own particular way.

Urquhart and Weir (1998:42) say, “In practice the term is used to refer to approaches in which the expectations of the reader play a crucial, even dominant, role in the processing of the text.”

It was exactly these ideas that were actively investigated and discussed. However, the top down approach did not long stand up to the scrutiny of the researcher’s microscope.

Urquhart and Weir (1998:44) explain:

But perhaps the most damaging criticism concerns the claim of Goodman, Smith and other writers that good readers guess more, and use the context more than poorer readers. A great deal of work had shown, quite conclusively, that while **all** readers use context, good readers are less dependent on it than poor ones. In fact, it has been shown that what distinguishes good from poor readers, at least among young populations, is the ability of the members of the first group to decode rapidly and accurately. ... In spite of this, as had been said above, the assertion by some that good readers use a bottom-up approach is only proven for word recognition.

Fortunately, it soon became clear that it was meaningless to concentrate on the reader alone at the expense of the text. Consequently, people like Elliot (1990:62) began stressing that a reader actually negotiates the meaning of a text through his interaction

with it. So, for instance, on reading about a beautiful protagonist, an Ethiopian reader might think of a woman with honey-coloured skin, almond-shaped eyes and jet black hair, while a Swedish reader might think of a blue-eyed blonde with milk white skin. However, both would have to modify their first thoughts if later on they read the heroine is Japanese.

2.2.3 An Interactive Approach to Reading

Following the Top Down approach, a more balanced view has come about. Maxwell and Meiser (1997:184) state “Emphasis has shifted from the text to interactions between text and reader; that is, what the reader brings to the reading is as important as the words in the texts. Text provide many possibilities for interpretation.” A good example of this is the traditional Ethiopian church schools where senior students are taught the multiple interpretations of verses in the Bible. It has been stated that up to thirty-two different interpretations have been derived from a single verse in Amharic. This is not surprising as Widdowson (1984:158) says “literary writers say less than would be referentially acceptable, leaving us deliberately in the dark about their intended meanings and in general making a virtue of ambiguity”.

McCormic (1988:77) associates the interactive model of reading with the philosophy of phenomenology that does not focus solely on the Being (text) nor on the Consciousness (reader) but rather on the point of contact (reading process) or interaction between the two. Based on an interactive model of reading, the provision of supplementary readers should enable students to enhance both their reading skills as well as their schemata of the world

and thus bring about a higher level of reading proficiency in students through the provision of the opportunity of many more literacy events beyond those made available in the classroom. Williams (1984:203) states, “There is now a fair degree of evidence that what is taught does not necessarily equal what is learnt, and that teaching a form does not automatically assist the learning of the form.” Therefore the provision of supplementary readers should assist the students to acquire English in their own preferred order. Modern conceptions of reading have added social factors like an acquisitionally rich environment and the socio-economic standing for students as affecting reading skills.

As a result of this new approach to understanding reading, the way of how to teach reading has also had to be revised. The main theory about how reading ought to be taught revolves around what is called the ‘Reader Response Theory’. This theory maintains that if reading is the meaning derived from the interaction between reader and text and each reader is unique, then individual reading experiences are also unique and even repeated readings of a single text by the same reader cannot be identical. As a result, teachers should not be teaching students to memorise ‘canons of literature’ or to repeat the interpretations of literary authorities. Instead the teachers should be encouraging the students to respond to literary texts in an informed way, fully appreciating how their individual personality traits, moods, memories and experiences are affecting their enjoyment and understanding of the text. This gives a secondary role to the mountains of factual information about the social context in which the work was written, the biographical details of the author and the interpretations of others. Instead, it turns the spotlight on how the reader responds to the text. If the reader finds that reading about and

discussing the author, the setting and the interpretation and responses of others, enhances his response then he can study them. However, they remain simply props to the central action of his reading and appreciating a text.

Although emphasising the reading that takes place in literary texts, such a concept is still valid while reading for factual information. The readers' expectations, predictions, prior knowledge and thinking schemata, still make the reading of a text unique to the reader, though admittedly not as pronounced as in the reading of literary texts. Consequently, a reader reading a road map of a place he is familiar with, might visualise the places on the map unlike a reader not familiar to the place.

2.2.4 An Interactive Compensatory Approach

Although interactive compensatory approaches do come under interactive approaches, they have a special place in the discussion of reading in L2. Second language readers differ from mother tongue readers due to the simple fact that they know another language and might even be literate in it before learning to read in the second language. Therefore, their reading could be affected by their previous abilities and knowledge. Urquhart and Weir (1998:45) elaborate:

The compensatory approach refers to the idea, intuitively appealing, that a weakness in one area of knowledge or skill, say in Orthographic Knowledge, can be compensated for by strength in another area, say Syntactical Knowledge. At the risk of labouring a point, we might claim that Goodman's account contains this notion, since he refers to weaknesses in the orthographic area being made up for by the 'strong syntax' or a real text, meaningful to the young reader. The notion of compensation has been alluded to in research in L2 reading, for example in Alderson and Urquhart (1985), where it was hypothesised that background knowledge might make up for inadequate language skills.

The interactive compensatory model holds special relevance in the Ethiopian situation as the students are already literate in Amharic. Therefore, they bring “literacy”, in that they presumably have fundamental concepts about the use of a text and how to go about reading it. They obviously lack orthographic knowledge as Amharic uses a different script. But they could have semantic skills, which could be transferred.

Moreover, interactive compensatory models adequately account for individual differences as each student has individual strengths and weaknesses, though they lack the generalisable factors that come with other models.

An interesting aspect that affects the interactive compensatory model, is what is commonly referred to as “threshold level”. This refers to some sort of minimal language ability that enables one to carry out any sort of meaningful reading. Therefore, Ethiopian students would come with their “literacy” and know about the mechanics of reading in Amharic, but they would also require a minimal grasp of English to start reading in it. “Threshold levels” vary according to the reading task and text, as a simple greeting card would require less English to understand than a long medical text. Nevertheless, it is assumed that there is a threshold level for various texts, which students need to have before they can carry out any meaningful reading.

2.3 The Role of Reading in English

Because Ethiopia is a ‘dual circle’ user of English, students need to be proficient at reading English to succeed properly in education. Starting from secondary school, where

English becomes the medium of instruction, most reference books are written only in English. As a result, English is the language, which provides access to knowledge. Although problems in listening could be and are overcome by teachers through the use of Amharic or other local languages during classroom lectures, students are forced to rely on their own skills without assistance, when it comes to reading books. It has been pointed out (NOE, 2001a:5) that most educational assessment conducted by UNESCO in African countries include a focus on reading as it is known that good reading skills, are a key factor for learning in other areas.

Crystal (1997:24) makes a convincing case for the use of English by pointing out its unrivalled role as the global language for international relations, international news, travel, safety, education and communications. Obviously, Ethiopian students want to be in touch with the latest thinking and research, and developing proficient reading skills is their best way to do this. This is especially true in Ethiopia, where in remote places lacking electricity and modern facilities, only printed material is readily available for the students. Nevertheless, most Ethiopian students do not master reading adequately. Instead they end up with fascinating skills of memorisation and recall, whereby they memorise whole books and simply regurgitate the contents on demand. This lack of sufficient comprehension, evaluation and synthesis has repercussions for the whole educational system. A particular case that illustrates this was a second year teacher trainee who memorised a thirty-two page handout and reproduced it in a final examination including all the typographical mistakes in the original. The fact that this trainee went on to

graduate top of his batch and was awarded the gold medal is a clear indication that the whole system encourages such an approach to reading.

Study skill courses, which equip students with reading, note-taking and other skills to cope with their academic courses are a common feature of a lot of preparatory course for foreign students joining institutions of learning in England. Unfortunately, Ethiopian students are never consciously equipped with such skills.

Starting from Grade One, they are taught English as a language course and this continues until the end of their education, without any obvious preparations for the switch to English as a medium of instruction after the second cycle of primary education.

Starting from Grade Nine all textbooks (except Ethiopian language ones) and reference books found in the libraries are written only in English. Students are expected to cover a lot of content in the subject areas in English, but have not been trained adequately in reading skills. Reading is given equal coverage to all the other language skills, despite the fact that it is the fundamental skill that they require to be successful in their secondary education.

Ironically, reading in English has the most pivotal role in secondary education, yet students are not trained to read effectively. Instead of being encouraged to understand and generate new ideas from what they have understood, they are simply taught to repeat almost verbatim ideas from the text. Students therefore mostly develop amazing skills of

simply recall and lack other skills like synthesis and appreciation. Unfortunately, the inclusion of extensive reading passages in the English textbooks have only recently taken place. Previous textbooks had factual passages with comprehension questions that only demanded regurgitation of facts from the passage. The new extensive reading sections allow the students to read for pleasure, yet even these passages tend to be skipped by teachers anxious to cover the textbooks by the end of the semester. Teachers are more interested in drilling grammar and other skills that are usually tested in final examinations, than encouraging students to develop other skills that may prove more difficult to test in the standard multiple choice format of examinations.

2.4 Textbooks and Learning Materials

Ethiopia tends to be associated with images of famine in the mind of most people who know about it through the media. However, the concept of the existence of a book famine does not readily spring to the mind of most people. Being a part of the ancient Nile Civilisation, Ethiopia has its share of ancient engravings and invaluable manuscripts written on leather parchment. But it was only at the turn of this century that books as a public source of knowledge were introduced alongside with Western education during the reign of Emperor Menelik.

During the reign of Emperor Haile-Selassie (1930 - 1974), the opening of many public schools led to the familiarisation of the possession and use of textbooks and learning materials by students. In the early half of this century, textbook production in Ethiopia was almost non-existent. Consequently, teachers and students had to use materials

imported from the West. Obviously researchers have criticised most of these materials for being culturally unsuitable (Gebeyehu, Getachew and Tesfaye, 1992:5).

Beginning in the 1950s, the adoption of a national language as a medium of instruction lead to the need for the adaptation, translation and production of learning materials. All of this in turn necessitated the development of a book industry in Ethiopia.

In 1952, the Curriculum Department was set up under the Ministry of Education to write and publish textbooks. Within a decade, international publishers wanted to establish publishing houses in Ethiopia. By 1962 Oxford University Press had established its own publishing house in Addis Ababa.

By 1974, the socialist government was making definite marks on the book industry that can still be seen today. Hare and Stoye (1998:2) comment “many deficiencies of the previous system remain also in the present system”. The first move was to nationalise most foreign owned businesses, which lead to the closing down of OUP. It was transformed into the Ethiopian Book Centre. This lead to the departure of all international publishers to other more hospitable African countries. The second was to set up the Educational Materials Production and Distribution Agency (EMPDA) which, in effect, monopolised all aspects of educational material production and distribution, stifling any possible national competition. The third was to set up a strict censorship authority, which screened and prevented many manuscripts from being published, thus hampering the development of local authors. The fourth and the last, was to set up a government

publishing house “Kuraz” that was “ primarily entrusted with the task of propagating socialist ideology to the Ethiopian people mainly through translated texts” (Ethiopian Educational Consultants /ETEC, 1997:23). Thus, this goal of using literature and learning materials as a means of indoctrinating people with socialist values led to a situation easily predictable retrospectively: a single title state-owned publishing system which was not commercially viable and had good translators but poor textbook writers. To be fair, all writers of the period had no alternative but to conform to the demands of the state.

Some of the brighter aspects of the Socialist era were the introduction of a nation-wide literacy programme as well as the production of learning materials for this programme in fifteen national languages. This campaign highlighted what could be achieved with community participation, as well as the possibilities of a rapid return to illiteracy in the absence of a literate environment, which provides opportunities for newly literate people to practise their skills. Although the educational system was dubious from a capitalistic viewpoint in that it was neither economically viable nor sustainable, the socialist government was able to provide free education at all levels and produce extremely cheap textbooks by using donated paper.

In 1991, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front seized control and once again set Ethiopia on a capitalistic path. Although encouraging moves have been made on the policy level, the situation of textbook production, provision and usage is far from perfect. Most people acknowledge that there is an acute shortage of learning materials at all levels.

To begin with production, regional education bureaux have the mandate for developing all textbooks at primary level. Unfortunately, however, almost all regions do not have the capacity to produce textbooks both in terms of producing the camera-ready-copy as well as the printing capacity. As a result, all regions except Region 14 (Addis Ababa) gave back the mandate of producing the English textbooks to the Institute of Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR), which in turn had a British advisor do most of the writing. Region 14 basically did a similar thing by getting former staff of ICDR to write their textbooks. As for textbooks in the other subjects, basically one textbook was written centrally and then translated into the various languages. This, in effect, neutralises the benefits of localisation stated in the Education Sector Development Programme (1998:8) of changing the content and adapting it to the immediate environment of the students. However, it might have contributed to the Cultural Policy, which supports the development of local languages (MOIC, 1997:15). Textbooks tend to have too many pages as writers are paid per page and so they go for ‘the more the merrier’. Once camera-ready-copies are produced, they are printed in printing presses located in Addis Ababa. Once again this does not alleviate problems of transportation nor does it contribute to the enhancement of regional printing capacity.

Regarding distribution lines, books are supposed to go from regional education bureaux to zonal education departments, then to woreda (District) education offices and finally into schools. However, several studies have shown that there are many instances where remote schools receive their textbooks before urban schools do. The missing shipments

have usually found their way onto the black-market, as no textbooks are sold to retail bookstores. At times, books spend months in various stores owing to store-keepers not being well-trained and indifferent to their punctual arrival at schools. Moreover, at times, books have to cross and re-cross the same distances due to zonal educational departments being further away from the points of distribution than the woreda educational offices under them.

Distribution has been said to be poor as a result of the lack of commitment and incentive (Hare and Stoye, 1998a:8) leading to the lack of a sense of urgency in the state bureaucracy. This, in turn, leads to teachers finding themselves forced to use new textbooks, which have arrived in the middle of the semester. Only a few teachers are usually given short training on how to use the books, and though they are expected to act as multipliers and train the rest of the teachers, this rarely occurs. Obviously, this does nothing to lessen the resistance to change from an old familiar textbook to an unfamiliar new one, about which not much orientation has been given.

However, even once the textbooks are in the school, everything is still not smooth. Very often regional education bureaux have had to cut down on the quantity of copies owing to “unforeseen” increases in price. So far from the 1:1 textbook student ratio envisaged by the ESDP, the actual ratio of distribution might be 1:3 which could express itself in the much worse ratio of 1:5 in the classroom. This is because some students forget their textbooks at home, while others are afraid of losing their valuable and irreplaceable textbooks, and leave them at home for safekeeping. Occasionally, the extremely unlucky

student returns home to find his illiterate father has torn out a page from the textbook to roll his tobacco in, or his mother has torn out a page for wrapping up the sugar she is selling. Moreover, the government has yet to introduce “acceptable loss margins” and the “weeding of stock” into all its library systems. Acceptable loss margins allow for the fact that a few books naturally go missing if a library is being used by numerous people, while the weeding of stock necessitates the replacement of some books which are outdated by new ones. A library with adequate funds could allow for up to 25% of the books to be weeded per annum, aiming to rejuvenate its entire stock in a period of four years. At present, librarians at all levels are held directly responsible for any loss of books. Therefore, librarians tend to be reluctant to lend out books, and keep them under lock and key, leading to the inaccessibility of books in those few places where they do exist. They certainly cannot be blamed when one sees the number of mutilated books with pages and even whole chapters torn out. In addition to this, at times schools have a surplus of one textbook and a shortage of another, but cannot swap with other schools because of inflexible systems of control. On retirement or resignation, librarians are expected to hand over each and every book that they received, when they took over the library, even if it was thirty years ago. Although, the weeding of stock might appear unrealistic, there are currently books such as “College Physics” in primary school libraries that naturally have not been touched for decades. If the librarians could weed their stock, unnecessary books would not compete for space on the crammed shelves, making the appropriate books more visible and accessible. Unfortunately, huge stocks of new textbooks can be found on the black market, while some schools have not yet received them. Amongst other factors,

this could be a result of the poor socio-economic status of the country, which encourages people to resort to illegal methods to gain extra income.

Unfortunately, despite forward looking government policies, there still appears to remain a socialist mentality in some people. Due to this, it would appear that people would prefer a single publisher like Mega to take over from EMPDA rather than there being several publishers coming up with several textbooks. They appear to think that there is one best option when it comes to textbooks and that the government knows best as to which that option is. New books sold even at cost price are regarded as unacceptably expensive because the people were used to subsidised books on the market during the socialist era.

Several NGOs and donors have seen the difficulties of the task of moving to a free textbook market scene from a single state publishing system. Therefore, they have drawn up small projects of their own to facilitate the process. To begin with, CODE-Ethiopia, a Canadian NGO, has attempted to improve the situation by distributing books obtained from the International Book Bank as well as developing books locally and purchasing locally published reading materials at all levels. They have trained librarians and established reading-rooms with the aim of improving accessibility. Then, British Council-Ethiopia has run several projects aimed at the provision of books including: Support to English Language Teaching, the Bulk Loan Scheme, the Primary Reader Scheme, and Ethiopian Stories in Simplified English. These projects have aimed at producing and providing books. Some of the projects were aimed at capacity building and provided training and computers for desktop publishing. In addition to this, the British Council

distributes books donated by Book Aid International and runs the busiest British Council library in the world. Next, Irish Aid-Ethiopia has been involved in the production of a local primary reader, the purchase of locally published readers and their distribution to these schools. Similarly, GTZ, the German development organisation, has been involved in the production of several local books such as readers, books on school management, and subject-related books, as well as the purchase and distribution of locally available materials. Finally, the Swedish International Development Agency has been the major supplier of free paper to EMPDA over the last several years. However, it now only provides EMPDA support in the form of technical assistance with the aim of making it a commercially viable publishing house.

A major concern with the donation of books is that this artificial dosage of free books instead of resuscitating the market, might meet the existing demand, and thus hinder the development of the local market. NGOs work under certain conditions and lay down preconditions which hamper a free market. For instance, a donation from the EU may come with the precondition that books are bought from Europe and not Africa, thus producing unfair conditions, which work against a free market. A second concern is that with the withdrawal of the donor or NGO, the whole project collapses owing to the lack of sustainability. Unless a project is completely run locally and a demand is there on the market, the withdrawal of subsidies or technical assistance could easily lead to a project coming to a standstill. A third concern is that books donated are not relevant to the needs of a specific country and simply impose a foreign culture upon the students and may not be related to the existing curriculum. Moreover, it could create a dependency syndrome in

which schools expect to receive free books rather than raise funds to purchase them. The abuse and misuse of free books may also come about because of a lack of feeling of ownership. Teachers are not encouraged to write materials as books are imposed from above. Besides, in the race to get through the textbooks with excessive pages by the end of the semester, teachers do not usually produce supplementary materials, but remain textbook bound.

With regard to the private sector, it is encouraging to see an increasing number of locally produced books on the market. Basically, there are two major local publishers, Ethiopian Book Centre (EBC) and Mega, in the private sector and a few multinationals such as Macmillan, Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press. EBC is basically the remnants of the former Oxford University press of Ethiopia now owned by a former employee. This publisher tends to put a small but steady trickle of books on the market, but also acts as a distributor/retailer in two small bookshops of the company in Addis. Mega is basically the transformation of the government publishing house Kuraz that was sold off under the move towards privatisation in the 1990s. Mega tends to hire most writers on a part-time basis and has not been able to get away from the per page payment arrangement.

Oxford University Press is working in co-ordination with a local organisation called Orbit and seems willing to risk money on the supposition that the government will soon allow multiple titles by producing its own set of primary level English textbooks with accompanying supplementary readers. Similarly, Cambridge University Press is working

in co-ordination with the newly established Rainbow Printers. They have recently launched a series of readers in three Ethiopian languages, Amharic, Afaan Oromo and Tigrigna. An interesting aspect of these readers is that they are all printed abroad and the illustrations and books have already been published in other African languages. Consequently, rather than taking the risk of losing a big investment on producing new Ethiopia readers, they have only had to change the text of previously published readers through translation and adaptation. If these readers prove profitable, they can launch into a full-fledged operation of producing readers for Ethiopia.

Apart from publishers, the Ethiopian book industry has had the interesting feature of authors, printers and financiers getting together to produce books and share the profits or mourn over the losses. This section has recently put an ever-increasing number of books on the market. Although some are of reasonably good quality and could be useful supplementary readers, they have not yet been able to link these books with the government educational system.

To sum up, at present there are insufficient numbers of textbooks and supplementary reading materials in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, positive steps are being taken by all parties concerned to overcome this shortage.

2.5 The Primary Reader Scheme

The Ethiopian Education Sector Development Program is calling for the introduction of supplementary readers to reinforce the learning of English at primary level (MOE,

1998a:37). As discussed above, this call is based on sound theoretical and practical justifications from other countries. This section will give a more in-depth view of the Primary Reader Scheme run by the British Council and the books that are being distributed in this scheme. It surprisingly challenges preconceived notions of what appropriate readers are by revealing that the choice of both teachers and students do not conveniently fit into theoretical categories for academicians and scholars.

2.5.1 Background History

A Primary Readers Scheme, set up with the ultimate aim of providing readers in English for all primary schools in Ethiopia, was started because of strong requests to the British Council from different primary schools for reading materials. The purpose of this project was to enable primary school students to develop the skill of English language reading and understanding, and to develop the habit of reading. A pilot project began in 1996 with the goal of improving the standard of English and education in basic education through the provision of 124 different readers to five schools in regions 14 and 4 for grades 5-8. The Primary Readers Scheme schools involved in the pilot scheme were Assela, Bishoftu, Denkaka, Entoto Amba and Medhanealem junior secondary schools. Each school was presented with the primary readers and after a year, a monitoring workshop was held. The schools were requested to assess the progress, development and impact of the scheme and to identify problems encountered and seek solutions. It was hoped that during this workshop the schools would share experiences as well as find ways and means to continue the project in the absence of aid.

Most of the participants confirmed that the readers are useful and relevant, and have encouraged the students to develop their reading skills. The directors of the five schools reported that the readers are kept in rooms meant for libraries in all schools except Denkaka where they are kept in boxes. The students read the books in the classroom, in the library and even under trees. Some of the students borrow the readers for use at home over weekends, while others formed reading and drama clubs with the assistance of teachers. The teachers had categorized the readers according to levels of difficulty and used some of the passages for class exams for grades 7 and 8. Moreover, the teachers also enjoyed reading the books in their own free time.

Some of the problems mentioned were the inadequacy of a single copy and the students' fear of losing the readers as they could not be replaced locally. They also stated that some of the stories were culturally inappropriate and that there was a lack of any Ethiopian readers.

2.5.2 Ranking and Describing the Readers

It was stated at the workshop that the participants had to select titles they felt to be most relevant and to indicate how many copies would be appropriate. As there was a fixed number of books to be given, they had to balance the number of copies with the number of titles. So a school that wanted all 124 titles could only have one copy, but if they chose ten titles, they could have around 12 copies of each. A final list of the favourite titles with the average number of recommended copies would be compiled, so that future schools to be included in the scheme would get useful books only. To make the selection of the

readers, the participants recommended that they go back to their respective schools and identify the type of readers and number of copies and submit the result within fifteen days. Some of them admitted to not having exact data as to which titles were frequently read. (See Appendix 2 for titles selected by each school.) In retrospect, one would have to re-evaluate the workshop and consider whether the teachers and directors were being frank in their response, or were rather providing the donors with the answers they assumed the British Council would want to hear, with the hope of receiving further donations.

Ranking the readers had some fundamental difficulties in that the question arises if these readers were ranked according to observed behaviour and preferences of the students, or the preferences of the teachers and the directors who attended the workshop. Being less sceptical and accepting the ranking at face value, when we rank the readers according to the schools' most favoured titles, we find the following,

Table2 : The Ranking of Readers by Schools

<i>Aladdin and his Magic Lamp</i>	Chosen by All 5 Schools
<i>Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves</i>	Chosen by 4 Schools
<i>King Solomon's Mines</i>	Chosen by 4 Schools
<i>The Stranger</i>	Chosen by 3 Schools
<i>Tales from the Arabian Nights</i>	Chosen by 3 Schools
<i>Animal Friends</i>	Chosen by 2 Schools
<i>Things fall Apart</i>	Chosen by 2 Schools
<i>The Bird and the Bread</i>	Chosen by 2 Schools
<i>Alissa</i>	Chosen by 2 Schools
<i>The World Around Us</i>	Chosen by 2 Schools
<i>Thirty Nine Steps</i>	Chosen by 1 School
<i>Animal Farm</i>	Chosen by 1 School

It is interesting to take a closer look at those titles selected by the schools as being more appropriate to the tastes of the students and that have, since the evaluative workshop, been distributed in the Primary Readers Scheme. Each reader is first described with a more critical analysis following.

2.5.2.1. Aladdin and his Magic Lamp

Aladdin and his Magic Lamp (Stempleski, 1989) is a reader at the Stage 1 of the Longman Structural Readers series that is classified into six stages. The tenses are limited to the present simple, while the text is supported with vivid colour illustrations. The story is told on twenty-one pages with two additional pages with questions. The book has a unique appearance as it is designed to have three or two columns per page, each column having a picture and text. As the book is written on A5 size paper and given a horizontal orientation, it gives the impression of being a comic book, except for the fact that the text is placed at the bottom of the pictures and not in speech bubbles.

This traditional Arab story has stood the test of time and is internationally popular. Although only the present simple tense is used, the exciting story overcomes this limitation. The depth of story provides substance, which can be enjoyed by different readers at different levels. Children initiation rights and myths are hinted at as the magician talks about the jewels and says, “ only a young boy can get them. There is a magic garden. A man can’t go there, but a boy can” (Stempleski, 1989:6). Entering and painfully emerging from the cavern has the womb motif, which could provide Freudians with plenty of rich materials for psychoanalysis. However, it is doubtful whether such

depth can be appreciated by young children. Consequently it is surprising that this book was chosen as the favourite by all five schools.

2.5.2.2. Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves

Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves is the traditional tale retold by L.A. Hill (1972) for the Oxford Graded Readers Scheme. These readers are graded into four stages at the 500, 750, 1000 and 1,500 headword levels. Each stage is again divided into junior and senior categories to avoid the difficulty of readers of different ages but the same reading ability finding the content less appealing to them. So *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* is at the first stage of 500 headwords and is in the senior category, as the other categories have fewer headwords. The story is told on 27 pages full of many coloured illustrations that break up the text, making it easier to understand.

Although this story lacks plausibility at an adult level it is one of the most popular and famous children's stories. It is unlikely that 39 thieves will all die silently turn by turn as a young girl pours a pan of hot oil of their head. Moreover, a stone that opens and closes to a password seems more like modern day high-tech inventions than an ancient reality. However the theme of the weak good people defeating the strong and the evil has been and still is a popular theme in literature. The colourful illustrations make the book attractive and it is not surprising that four of the five schools chose this book as a favourite.

2.5.2.3. King Solomon's Mines

King Solomon's Mines is a reader of the Oxford Progressive Readers Series, which has many of the classic literary masterpieces simplified for learners of English. The Oxford Progressive Readers Series is divided into 5 grades having 1,400, 2,100, 3,100, 3,700 and 5,000 words respectively. *King Solomon's Mines* is Grade 4 and consequently has 3,700 words. It has relatively few black and brown illustrations in the 100-page story. New words are usually explained in the text and repeated several times to reinforce vocabulary acquisition.

This story is an intriguing choice. The English is comparatively difficult and quite likely above the comprehension level of many Ethiopian school children. Furthermore, the story is full of tradition stereotypes of smart white adventurers and cruel and ignorant blacks. The people of Kukuana are persuaded into believing that the whites and the Zulu have come from the stars and see the darkening of the eclipse as proof of their powers. Even after some time, “The Kukuanas got tired of his glass eye and ‘melting teeth’, but it seemed they would never get tired of looking at his ‘beautiful white legs’.” (Haggard, n.d. 98). Captain Good obligingly pulls up his trousers to the knee and the women murmur with delight at the sight of his white legs. Apparently, however, the story has been appreciated for the adventures involved rather than for its being plausible or realistic. It would appear that the exciting storyline has overcome any of its shortcomings. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that literary critics would consider a Victorian adventure story suitable for African students today, as they would argue that it is not

“politically correct” and touches upon many sensibilities. Despite this, the teachers and students liked it.

2.5.2.4. The Stranger

The Stranger (Whitney, 1977) is a reader at the elementary level of the Heinemann Guided Readers. The Heinemann Guided Readers series has the five levels of starter, beginner, elementary, intermediate and upper. At the elementary level the vocabulary is set at around 1,000 basic words and most tenses are used. Simple adverbial and adjectival phrases are used and sentence clauses are kept at no greater than two. New words that can be derived from the context are introduced. The illustrations are in black and white and there is a lot of text in the 54 pages of the story.

This book is an interesting choice in that, although it has suspense and mystery, the end is not particularly satisfying as there is no explanation as to why Slatin deliberately burns to death in his shop. Moreover, the culture of injuring mannequins and voodoo, as a whole is non-existent in Ethiopia, where cursing and poisoning is more common. The context is also foreign to Ethiopia, as railway stations, film stars involved in sorcery, and going to other cities for romantic weekends are not very common. Nevertheless, the language level is suitable for students, who have had 4-8 years of learning English as a subject.

2.5.2.5. Tales from the Arabian Nights

Tales from the Arabian Nights (Foulds 1992) is a reader of the Oxford Progressive Readers Series, like *King Solomon’s Mines*. It is at Grade 1 and 1,400 words. The main

story is told on fifty-three pages with a further four pages devoted to questions and activities. It has a few colour illustrations dispersed throughout the book.

It is surprising that *Tales from the Arabian Nights* was not chosen by all five schools as it not only includes the most popular Aladdin but other stories as well. In fact, selecting this reader should have allowed the teachers to leave Aladdin and Ali Baba out of their lists and include other stories instead. The fact that there are quite a few sexist remarks about women being as fickle as leaves blowing in the wind and at times intolerably talkative does not seem to have disturbed the teachers. Moreover, there are a few negative depictions of Africa as being utter wilderness. The description of a beautiful woman as being, “..tall and dark, with red lips and hair like a black cloud around her lovely face,” (Foulds, 1992:51) must have been more familiar to the teachers than the Eurocentric blue-eyed blonde description.

2.5.2.6. Animal Friends

Animal Friends (Mitchelhill 1993) is a Level 4 book at a reading series called New Reading 360 produced by a not so familiar publisher called Ginn and Company Limited. The New Reading 360 series is composed of six levels and has accompanying teachers' resource books, which were not distributed with the readers. The story is told on 32 pages with colour illustrations and a few lines of text on each page.

This story is very basic in terms of language and plot. Apart from the crocodile chasing the innocent men, nothing interesting really happens. The characters are interestingly all

Africans. Once again the colour illustrations are made to give life to the story, which might be useful in teaching environmental protection.

2.5.2.7. Things Fall Apart

Things Fall Apart is the well-known book written by Chinua Achebe retold by John Davey (1972). Like *The Stranger*, it is a reader of the Heinemann Guided Readers but it is at the intermediate level. At this level the vocabulary is set at around 1,600 basic words and most tenses are used. Sentences are limited to a maximum of three clauses and attention is paid to pronoun reference. New words that can be derived from the context are introduced and difficult allusion and metaphor are avoided while cultural backgrounds are made explicit. The illustrations are in black and white and there is a lot of text in the 84 pages of the story.

Things Fall Apart is an interesting choice, as the questions of relevance and afrocentricity making a book more appealing to an African audience are challenged. The book has been chosen by only two of the schools, yet is considered in academic circles as a piece of African literature par excellence. To be fair, the story actually has many things that are alien to the Ethiopian culture. These include the killing of twins, the killing of adopted children, the taking of persons from another tribe as compensation for someone killed and sending children to local gods. The whole theme of adapting to changing times caused by colonialism was not experienced first hand in Ethiopia, as Ethiopia was not colonised. However, this book is mandatory reading on most literature courses at tertiary level. The teachers' own knowledge of the text could have influenced its popularity, as most

teachers are familiar with this story in African literature courses they take in teacher training colleges.

2.5.2.8. The Bird and the Bread

The Bird and The Bread (Howe, 1983) is a Grade 2 book of the Start with English Readers, which is divided into six grades. Grade 2 basically uses only the simple present and present continuous tenses and elementary words. The story begins with these sentences “This is a bird and a tree. The bird is little. It is red. ... Look at the Bread” (Howe, 1983:1). The story is told on sixteen pages with another four pages composed of an alphabetical picture dictionary. The story is composed mainly of bird colourful illustrations with very few words, while the dictionary has ten prepositions and fifty-two words all illustrated by small colour illustrations.

The story is very simple along with the language. It gives the sense of being written to illustrate the structures and vocabulary rather than having any intrinsic value of its own. The characters and setting for the pictures are European with the typical British policeman in his uniform and helmet. Although similar stories exist in children’s nursery rhymes and memory games, this story appears rather dull for reading despite the attempt of the illustrations to liven it up. *The Bird and the Bread* is the most elementary story of all twelve stories chosen and it is a bit disturbing that this book is chosen as a favourite amongst students, who have had 4-8 years of learning English as a subject.

2.5.2.9. Alissa

Alissa (Moore, 1989) is a reader at the starter level of the Heinemann Guided Readers series that is classified into Starter, Beginner, Elementary, Intermediate and Upper. The vocabulary at this level is controlled to approximately 300 words and the tenses are limited to the present simple, present continuous and the future. The text is supported with vivid colour illustrations and it is assumed that a student with a very basic knowledge of English should be able to read and enjoy a story at this level.

It is not surprising that this book has been chosen. Hill (1997:68) mentions it by name amongst the Heinemann Guided Readers as an example of the possibility to create “an interesting story within very limited language”. However, what is a bit disturbing is that this book was written at the most basic of levels and it is chosen as a favourite amongst students, who should have more advanced English reading skills.

2.5.2.10. The World Around Us

The World Around Us (Howe, 1984) is a Grade 6 book of the Start with English Readers. This series is divided into six grades and apparently was first produced by an organisation called “Guided English Corporation”. It is not a typical reader in that it is not an abridged version of a piece of literature nor a story written for children. Instead it is more of a general knowledge activity book with interesting facts about various things. It has fifteen chapters of around one page each on various topics ranging from the earth to spiders. Each chapter is followed by some comprehension questions. The chapters are printed on 43 pages and are supported by diagrams and photographs of the topic under discussion.

A typical chapter is an expository text of the topic. For instance, the chapter about spiders has a coloured picture of a spider in the middle of its web and explains, “An insect is a very small animal with six legs and a body with three parts. A spider is not really an insect because it has four pairs of legs and its body only has two parts” (Howe, 1984:17).

Although this book is not a typical reader and lacks the suspense and excitement that readers are meant to raise, two schools selected it. This is probably because it fits into the pattern that most primary schoolteachers and students are familiar with. There is a text with facts that can be memorised and used to answer questions posed at the end. Perhaps this reader could serve as a useful bridge between the reading comprehension texts in the textbook and the stories that most extensive reading schemes use to get students reading.

2.5.2.11. Thirty-Nine Steps

The Thirty-Nine Steps is a simplified version of the same story by John Buchan retold by Nick Bullard (1994) to suit the Oxford Bookworms Series. This series is divided into six levels categorised by the number of headwords. The headwords at each stage are 400, 700, 1000, 1400, 1800 and 2,500. Consequently as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is at stage four, it has 1,400 headwords. The story is told on 72 pages and in addition to the comprehension questions that are found at the end of most of these series, Oxford Bookworms also has a glossary.

The Thirty-Nine Steps has been made into a famous Hitchcock film and it is not surprising that this book has been chosen as a favourite. Although it is set in Scotland and

the pictures portray typical British settings and characters, the sheer thrill of the story has definitely managed to overcome any culturally difficult concepts like descriptions of the tide, which could cause problems to students who have grown up in a landlocked country. However, it is perhaps such difficulties that made this book a favourite in only one of the schools.

2.5.2.12. Animal Farm

George Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm* has been produced in the Longman "Bridge Series" as a relatively short novel in comparison to most readers. The language and the story have been simplified. The story is told on 97 pages of text, which have no illustrations. It has a short introduction of five pages giving some background information about George Orwell's biography and about the social context in which *Animal Farm* was written. Moreover, apart from 20 comprehension questions, the book has an extensive glossary of 22 pages with around 800 words to support weaker readers.

Animal Farm is one of the most popular stories worldwide and has been reprinted almost twice a year since it was first printed in 1945. This version is its 87th impression printed in 1995. It used to be compulsory reading in Ethiopia in some teacher training colleges, until the socialist revolution, which banned it. Most of the teachers can definitely apply their experiences from the socialist period to enjoying it. The government's forcing people into doing work that, "... was strictly voluntary, but any animal who absented himself from it would have his rations reduced by half," (Orwell, 1945:41) was a common feature of Ethiopia's socialist period. Moreover, the arbitrary changing of rules and regulations can clearly be reflect upon in the changing of a commandment to read,

“No animal shall kill any other animal *without cause*” (Orwell, 1945:62). In fact, some of the political realities continue even in present day Ethiopia, and people could easily identify with the animals that see the rising of production statistics by 200% yet “they would sooner have had less figures and more food” (Orwell, 1945:63). However, it is unlikely that most Ethiopian children in Grade Eight will have achieved both the English reading skills and the maturity to read and fully appreciate this book, in spite of its having been simplified. This is probably why it has been chosen as a favourite by only one school.

2.5.3 Analysis of Selection

The facts of the findings are given above, but the interpretation and analysis of these facts can be subjective.

2.5.3.1. Language Level Appropriateness

A very big variance in the level of language can be seen in the above choice of readers. Books like *Animal Friends* and *The Bird and the Bread* are more at a level of the barely literate, while *King Solomon’s Mines* and *Thirty-Nine Steps* are at quite an advanced level. Renandya and Jacobs (2002:297) actually encourage the use of simple materials in the first stages of any reading schemes. They say:

Unlike in intensive reading, where the material is typically above students’ linguistic level, in ER the material should be near or even below their current level. To use Second Language Acquisition (SLA) jargon, students should be reading texts at an i+1, i, or i-1 level, with “i” being their current proficiency level. The rule of thumb here is that to get students started in the program, it is better that they read easier texts than more challenging ones. For students who have minimal exposure to contextualized language and who lack confidence in their reading, even i-2 material may be appropriate...

This may appear reassuring with choices such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Alissa, Animal Friends* and *The Bird and the Bread* are more at an 'i-4' level. But this raises serious questions as to whether teachers are aware that some of their students can hardly read and have chosen the simplest readers available.

2.5.3.2. Theoretical Interpretations

Simply by looking at the readers selected several different interpretations could be given, depending on the theoretical bent of the observer.

The first interpretation could be called a Pan-Africanist view in which a call for more African readers is made. Here, it is interesting to note that the teachers and school directors said that most of the books were not very culturally appropriate and wanted more books by African writers in general. This reflects the theories that researchers put forward such as:

In the Ethiopian situation probably the learners have not identified with or accepted the input and so their filters are blocked. One of the hypotheses of this thesis is that if the Ethiopian language learner is exposed to material within their schematic reality, as a beginning, there is a chance that the filter will be lowered and so encourage learner-response. ... Comprehensible input therefore seems to have an important role in language learning and so in the Ethiopian context probably African literary texts can play this role,(Abiye,1995:37) .

Yet when we come to the actual selection of titles *African Child* does not rank first on any list. *Things Fall Apart* does rank very well, but it is definitely not the unanimous favourite. This, in a way, raises questions about the assertion that the writings of one African country has close connections to the reality of its neighbours. Some of the points

that Ethiopians might find unfamiliar have been pointed out above. But Pan-Africanists have argued that there were hardly any African readers in the original list of titles, so the selection of *Things Fall Apart* is actually a 50% success rate of African literature. Others have complained that both readers are actually adult books simplified and therefore are not comparable to readers intended originally for children, so there is no ground for comparison. Still others say that stories such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Aladdin and his Magic Lamp* actually have their roots in the Middle East and Africa, ignoring their popularity world wide. The fact that they were chosen could reflect the preference of children (and adults) for fantasy. However, the fact that one of classic post-colonial pieces was not top of the list definitely opens the door to the question of whether there is such a thing as a common African culture throughout the continent. Moreover one might ask whether African literary pieces are being exalted more for their political correctness than for their being popular amongst the general public.

The second interpretation can be called a universalist view. Such a view would maintain that it is the books that have stood the test of time such as *Aladdin and his Magic Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and *King Solomon's Mines* that were chosen almost unanimously. This indicates that stories that are interesting have universal appeal and transcend cultural limitations. Consequently, they claim that “cultural appropriateness” is more a reflection of adult bias than of the actual readers’ preference. Moreover, a lot of work is studied merely for the fact that they are written by Africans rather than because of any inherent literary value. So students will not enjoy these sorts of texts, if they are not appealing in themselves. Good readers, with literary merits from any

culture, will be readily appreciated and liked by readers all over the world. This view could explain why books with obviously prejudiced views to Africa, like *King Solomon's Mines*, were enjoyed and selected. However, advocates of such a view ignore masses of research that proves cultural and schematic familiarity renders texts more comprehensible to readers (e.g. Duff and Maley, 1990:7).

The third interpretation can be called a Pragmatic View. Here we need not disregard all appeals for African Literature, but instead we should refine our thinking and realise that Africa is so vast that what is common knowledge in a certain area might be completely unfamiliar in another. Therefore we have to reduce our sights to more specific regions or areas. Achebe (1975:45) talks about African literature being a group of associated units rather than a single unit in itself. So perhaps we should zoom in on the “Ethiopian Unit” and examine if such texts are more in tune with students preferences. If we are aiming at encouraging motivation by making our students identify with the text, then we have to ensure that the themes and characters do indeed reflect the students’ reality. It is not wise to ignore completely the research showing the usefulness of schematic familiarity. Yet at the same time, one should not unquestioningly accept some intangible concept of pan-African unity, which is created by intellectuals in ivory towers and divorced from the felt needs and realities of the students’ milieux.

No reader should be dismissed simply because it comes from a “foreign” culture, as good literature deals with universal human values, emotions and conflicts that transcend cultures and so will have universal appeal. Nevertheless, an average reader, which comes

from a familiar setting, is easier for the student to understand. Consequently, Ethiopian readers should be exposed not to general African stories, but more specifically to Ethiopian stories, in which they find subject matter that is familiar. So the promising start of Ethiopian writing for children must be encouraged.

Nevertheless, the selection of appropriate titles is not an easy task. Read (1996:105) states:

Selection of titles is often undertaken by those who have no professional training in reading development or in children's literature. Frequently selection is more concerned with national, pedagogic, or religious values than with the identification of materials of inherent interest to the children.

As a result of the pilot study of the Primary Reader Scheme, the British Council has divided the main project into two. The first one is a carry on from the past with a nation wide trial commenced in co-ordination with the Ministry of Education. This comprises ten copies of the twenty selected titles (200 readers) to fifty schools across Ethiopia. The second is a new project entitled Ethiopian Stories in Simplified English that aims at the creation of two local readers for each region. Unfortunately, neither of the projects has been fully implemented and cannot be evaluated yet.

Nevertheless, they are a move in the right direction. Oliveira (1996:87) says that the biggest obstacle to reading schemes is possibly the limited supply of books in developing countries and that students are often given unfamiliar foreign books, typically produced in developed countries. This is not surprising, when one looks at

what is available on the market. It has been estimated that as little as 1% of all supplementary readers in the world are set in Africa (Hill, 1997:62).

A direction for future research could be to more effectively and objectively note students' preferences and be directed by their actual choices rather than be lead by theoretical justifications based on dubious assertions.

2.6 Teaching Methodology in Ethiopia

Unfortunately, some educationists take a narrow perspective of education and forget that it is not an independent entity existing in a vacuum, but it is part and parcel of society as a whole. Some changes in society have reactions in education. Postle (1988:172) maintains that most modern societies are in a process of changing paradigms. He says that there is a move from an old paradigm, which is authoritarian and has its basis in a domination-subordination relationship, to a new paradigm that stresses democratic relationships in which power is shared by everyone. Keeping in mind that Ethiopia has just come out of severely authoritarian governments, it is not surprising to find that this is reflected in the education system. As education is a product of society and in its turn shapes society, the paradigms discussed are clearly reflected in the methodology of teaching. Traditional methodologies reflecting the old paradigm have a generally transmissive character, whereas modern innovative methodologies follow a more interactive approach. As a result of their belonging to given socio-economic systems based on domination, the traditional teaching methods also reflected and were shaped by it. The teacher was the central figure who had all the knowledge and the power and the

students were obedient pawns who did what they were told to do. The simile between students and empty vessels waiting to be filled is one often mentioned. Postle explains (1988:163):

Dominance is covertly built into the social fabric through the educational system including higher education. Students are controlled and assessed according to the unilateral, authoritarian judgements of the staff. Given a predetermined syllabus, encouraged to learn in ways dictated by others and taught by people who make the final assessment, what do students do? They conform to the attitudes and preferences of those who decide their future.

Therefore, in the past, when single governments had complete control and civic societies could not do much to affect the course of their development, only the leaders were supposed to direct and others were supposed to follow submissively. Similarly, the teacher was seen as the leader who directed and the students at the people who followed submissively. Thus, transmissive methodologies, which encourage submissive behaviour, were apparent in most academic subjects. In the teaching of language, the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method and the lecture are the most prevalent methods. The grammar-translation method gives the teacher the role of the oracle that has all the answers and understands everything about the foreign language. Students are simply obliged to apply the rules to decode passages and texts.

Consequently, it is not surprising to find that the teaching of reading in Ethiopia follows this general pattern. The students are requested to stand up in class and read aloud while the teacher constantly interrupts, correcting pronunciation or explaining a word, thereby displaying omniscient knowledge. After the comprehension passage is read aloud, the teacher once again poses questions from the textbook usually to students he feels are not paying attention. He finally gives the correct answers, careful to show he already knew them without consulting the teachers' guide and then moves on to the next section of the textbook. The answers are usually whole sentences extracted in their entirety from the

reading passage. Herein lies the incentive for students to memorise and reproduce texts without much understanding.

Needless to say, these transmissive methods are not very effective. According to modern researchers, the average retention rate of a student from listening to lectures and reading aloud is 5% and 10% respectively, whereas the average retention rate for group discussion and practice is 50% and 75% respectively, although these figures may not be accurate and may even show strong bias, as each learner has different rates of retention and motivation varies. Still they do show a general picture of how ineffective transmissive teaching methodologies are. Moreover, the most important skills in reading, such as skimming, scanning, inferring meaning and the like, are actively stifled with such an approach. Intensive and extensive reading is neglected for the rote memorisation of grammatical rules without any application on how students can use them to get meaning from the text.

Discussing methodology, Williams (2000:127) comments:

In language education two restrictions are particularly evident. One is a kind of 'stratal' trap through which teachers of young children are obliged to spend large amounts of time on relations between phonology and graphology, as though this stratum were more basic for basic ideas about language than the stratum of meaning. The other restriction results from an unhinging of meaning and grammar in education, dating back at least to the beginnings of compulsory universal school.

Read (1996:99) states that at times, "teachers are entirely dependent on traditional textbook approaches and find free reading threatening because it could reveal their lack of subject knowledge". He also explains that many trained and untrained teachers have no

experience using supplementary readers. However, Elley (1996:53) is much more reassuring, explaining that teachers introduced to the potential value of good stories are much more willing to adopt a literature-based approach once they see the benefits in terms of students' positive attitudes and higher achievements.

2.7 The Reading Syllabus

The terms “syllabus” and “curriculum” have both been used to refer to the macro educational content aims as well as specific course aims, according to the definitions of the specific author. ICDR, however, appears to produce both macro and micro level contents in their syllabus, which runs contrary to the educational policy of regionalisation that allows for specific regions to modify the curriculum to their own needs and environment. For instance (ICDR, 1997:5), the curriculum states that students should be able to ask about and describe people. Instead of stopping here and allowing for course developers to decide what sort of people they would like to describe, it then goes into specific details and even gives adjectives such as “tall, short fat and thin”.

As this thesis is focussing on reading, which in the Ethiopian context is prescribed by the ICDR, a brief description of the first cycle language syllabus and the second cycle English syllabus follows.

2.7.1 First Cycle Language Syllabus

The syllabus for the first cycle primary education (Grades 1- 4) is an integrated syllabus that sub-divides the subjects into the four general categories of Aesthetics and Physical

Education, Sciences, Social Sciences, and Languages (ICDR,1997). As a result, English is found under the general section of languages. The entire syllabus consists of 165 pages, but each Grade is numbered beginning from 1, so the pages relevant for one grade are numbered consecutively. The language syllabus does not take into account the fact that some of the students will be first language speakers of some of the languages, while others will not. Therefore students appear to be required to “read simple words” (ICDR,1997:26), but no mention is made as to whether this objective is expected to be achieved at the same time by both first and second language speakers of the national language. There will be both second and first language speakers of a given national language due to the existence of spatial multilingualism. So for some of the students in the class the medium of instruction will be their mother tongue, but for others it could be a second or even third language. It is the same syllabus for all students. The syllabus seems to have been written by authors with completely differing concepts of language education, consequently traditional methods like the distinction of phonemes are inter-mixed with a functional syllabus like the ‘exchanging of greetings’, without any apparent attempt at harmonisation or having a consistent language learning theory underlying it. It is said to have been prepared with the new idea of integration in mind. It suggests various themes that can be used across the subjects in the various grades including Members of the Family; Clean Hands; Dwelling Places; Schools; Playgrounds; Domestic Animals, Trees and Plants, Villages, Houses, Types of Food, Relatives and Neighbours. Reading aloud is taught here in contrast with reading silently and methods and techniques like chorus repetition do not lend themselves to a communicative approach. The use of oral literature can be integrated with the cultural

aspect in aesthetics, but the use of photographs, recordings, newspapers do not seem to take the actual situation of most Ethiopian primary schools into consideration. In rural schools basics like chairs and tables are not available. Only a few of the rural schools have recently got a solar panel to generate electricity for a single radio to benefit from radio programmes. Even government schools in Addis do not have access to newspapers, photographs and tape-recorders.

The general objectives of improving the four language skills as well as developing knowledge of linguistics and literature objectives are stated at the beginning of each grade. Although not necessarily related to English, some of the objectives that can be related to reading in general in Grade One include distinguishing the shapes of various letters and minimal pairs as they occur in words and phrases, and joining and reading the words and sentences. In Grade Two the students are expected to read given texts and respond to them in speech or writing. In Grade Three reading becomes more focussed on classroom learning, and students are expected to read aloud individually and in chorus, be able to skim passages and understand the gist as well as learn how to use a library. This objective appears particularly unrealistic as access to libraries is not very good. In Grade Four, the focus on reading for academic purposes is further emphasised. Here students are expected to learn to adjust reading skill to reading purpose. Reading with purpose and speed along with the ability to scan for information and distinguish themes and topic sentences are specifically stated for this level (ICDR 1997:18). The syllabus states that the students will gather and explain information from reference materials, newspapers and magazines. However, as discussed later on in this thesis, librarians complained that

these materials are not available in the libraries. In fact, most of the school libraries do not even allow students in the first cycle of education to even sit in the libraries. In addition, students are expected to be able to use directories and appendixes, and to make notes. The peak of the objectives to teaching the students to read appears to be the reading of poems. Once again, there is nothing tangible as to what sort of poems are expected to be read by which students in which language. There is no mention of literary prose or indications of possible texts.

Even though it is not quite clear from the syllabus as to which of these reading skills are to be acquired in the mother tongue and which in English, the fact that these reading skills are being acquired should lay a sound foundation for the pupils reading abilities. So it can be deduced for the first cycle syllabus that all students who have completed Grade Four should be reading fairly proficiently in at least one language and be able to cope with reading poems. Moreover, they should also have the basics of reading in English too.

2.7.2 Second Cycle English Syllabus

The second cycle English syllabus stands alone in a separate booklet of 43 pages (ICDR,1998) . There appears to be a break with the language teaching objectives in the first cycle in that this syllabus focuses solely on developing the four language skills disregarding literature and linguistics. The major themes for the units are spelt out, bringing it closer to a course syllabus level. At Grade Five, the objectives include asking and giving personal details, identifying, comparing and describing animals, people and

objects, and talking about the family. At Grade six some of the major themes include Ethiopia's neighbouring countries, the peoples of Ethiopia, the weather and using social expressions. At Grade Seven the unit themes include telling stories, advising people and daily routines. Grade Eight includes talking about the future, describing processes and actions. It appears that the curriculum planners are using a cyclical model as many of the themes are repeated at all four grades. Although the integrated curriculum does not apply at the second cycle some of the unit themes appear to be deliberately selected to link up with other subjects.

There has been a major shift in methodology in the reading component of the second cycle syllabus. Most of the reading exercises call for individual silent reading. The major aim for Grade Five has been described as enabling students to read and understand short passages about a variety of topics. In some units definite mention is made that students have got to read "Extracts from other simplified books," (ICDR 1998:23). This statement supports the objectives of the ESDP to provide the students with supplementary readers. In other places, teachers are advised to use extracts from books, magazines and newspapers. However, the advice to use video-cassettes, audio-cassettes and slides does not seem related to the objective reality of Ethiopia. At Grade Six the major aim of enabling students to read texts on a variety of topics is repeated. Specific reference is made to skimming and scanning, intensive and extensive reading, and the need for pre-reading activities. It is suggested that the teachers use many reading passages with definite advice given to use supplementary readers and extracts from stories in Unit 13. The students are expected to discuss a story and compare it with other stories in Unit 24.

Grades Seven and Eight do not have specific introductions to their syllabus. However, from looking at the syllabus content, it can be deduced that reading is not neglected. Pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities are recommended. In some units teachers are told to select reading materials from authentic sources. Consequently, it would appear that due focus has been given to the teaching of reading at this level. However, there is obviously a major difference in the educational orientation of the people who wrote the syllabus for the first cycle and the second cycle. It would appear that the people who prepared the second cycle syllabus are much more aware of current teaching methodologies, while those who prepared the first cycle syllabus had not been up-dated. This mismatch between the teaching of reading between the two cycles, can have a negative impact on the students reading skills.

2.8 Reading in the Grade Eight Textbook

All students involved in this study are using the Grade Eight English student book prepared by the Addis Ababa City Administration Education Bureau (AACAEB, 1998). This book has the unassuming title of “English Student Book: Grade 8” clearly showing that it was produced for a single title textbook market. It was published in 1998 at Mega Printing Enterprise and has twenty units and 171 pages. The contents of these units closely resemble those suggested in the syllabus prepared by ICDR, but some of the themes have been sub-divided. The student book has no introduction.

Each unit has a traditional reading comprehension adapted from various sources including a book published in 1967 and several from Ethiopian Airline’s flight magazine.

For instance, Unit 10 has a passage on Ethiopian Birds, while Unit 11 and Unit 12 are about Ethiopian Airlines and Addis Ababa International Airport.

There is usually one or two pre-reading questions intended to raise the students' interest and expectations, but these do not seem to have been seriously thought over. For instance, in Unit 11 students are informed that the first and second jet flights of Ethiopian Airlines were from Bole International airport to Nairobi and Madrid (AACAEB, 1998:97). Then on Unit 12 the title of the reading comprehension is written in big bold letters as “Addis Ababa International Airport” and the first pre-reading question asks, “Where do you think is [sic] Bole International Airport?”

There are a variety of exercises in the post-reading questions including comprehension questions, true /false questions, reference questions, sentences with blanks, tables to be filled and the like. For instance, students have to decide whether it is true or false that Bole Airport started its operations in 1964 (AACAEB, 1998:107) and decide what the theme of Paragraph Four is from four supplied suggestions.

In general, the textbook is not very appealing. It is published entirely in black and white, and the text runs into the margins, giving it a cluttered appearance. The textbook would require a very good teacher to bring it to life.

2.9 Reading in the Grade Eight National English Examination

The Grade Eight national examinations are held throughout Ethiopia and are given to all Ethiopian students on completing both cycles of primary education. They are meant to set some kind of uniform national standard to ensure students from all regions have attained the skills set out by the ICDR. These examinations are set centrally by the National Organisation for Examinations (NOE). The NOE was established under the present government as it was felt a separate organisation should do the evaluating rather than the organisations involved in the teaching. Its main aim is to improve the quality of examinations to ensure a comparability of standards between regions and schools (MOE,1998a:18). It has also set the aim of carrying out research to modernise the examination system, indirectly acknowledging the fact that the present examination system is lagging far behind the theories of evaluation and assessment.

It is clear that the Grade Eight National English Examination is lagging behind theories of evaluation and assessment as it only tests one of the four language skills taught. Listening, Speaking and Writing are all neglected, while grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and comprehension are all tested through reading. Although it is obvious that the students' acquisition of English cannot be measured through such an examination the vast number of students taking this examination and the need to correct and return results quickly is used as an excuse not to implement a more balanced examination.

The English examination usually has sixty questions and students are given sixty minutes to do them. All sixty questions are multiple choice with each question having

four possible answers for the students to choose from. Most of the questions follow a cloze text technique with a statement having one word missing. An illustration from the most recent examination is “Wro Alemitu and ___ husband are teachers,” (NOE, 2000:14). However some direct questions such as, “Which city is found in the Republic of Ireland?” (NOE, 2000:18) or “Which one of the following words is wrongly spelt?” (NOE, 2000:17) are also included. All of these are followed by a choice of four answers.

- The English examination is divided into various sections including usage, vocabulary, comprehension and the like. A closer observation of the reading skills tested in the examination held in 2000 gives us the following:

Word recognition is tested by the selection of words in a reading comprehension and then asking students to select a sentence, which means the same things. For instance, (NOE, 2000:25):

57. “tricks” (line 5) means _____.
1. lessons given to train animals
 2. news read on the radio
 3. skilful acts performed to make people happy
 4. sticks used by people to punish animals

Moreover, vocabulary from their English textbook is given in sentences and the students have to decide which of the given alternatives is the same as the underlined word (NOE, 2000:21).

Word selection is tested in sentences like “Zerihun does things _____” and the students have to choose amongst answers like “care”, “careless” and “carelessly” (NOE, 2000:15).

Appropriate letter clusters are tested by students being asked to pick out words that are misspelt. Therefore, words with letter clusters that are not English like “ksletrs” are recognised as wrong. These questions simply ask “Which one of the following words is wrongly spelt?” (NOE, 2000:17).

Sentence formation and structure is evaluated in several ways such as asking students to choose a sentence that is wrongly formed or asking the students which sentence could be an appropriate response to a given question. At times, a sentence is given and then four alternatives are provided and the students have to choose the alternative that has the same or nearly the same meaning as the original sentence, as in the following example:

32. Gemechu works in a restaurant and so does his brother.
1. Both Gemechu and his brother work in a restaurant.
 2. Either Gemechu or his brother works in a restaurant.
 3. Neither Gemechu nor his brother works in a restaurant.
 4. Gemechu works in his brother’s restaurant.
- (NOE, 2000:19)

Scanning for specific information is encouraged by the placing of information in a table and then asking the students to answer questions such as “Which city is found in the Republic of Ireland?” (NOE, 2000:18). The students then have to select amongst London, Dublin, Auckland and Toronto. It is assumed that the students will not have

much general knowledge about these cities and will quickly have to scan the table to find the answer.

Skimming for gist is assessed by the inclusion of a relatively long passage of thirty-two lines and the question “This passage is mainly about _____.” (NOE, 2000:22). Although, the students can read the passage intensively and obtain the answer, this question is obviously intended to encourage the students to skim the passage for the central idea.

Reordering sentences is tested by the following rearrangement question:

The following four sentences are about the famous Ethiopian Athlet [sic], Abebe Bikila. The sentences are not in their correct order. Read all the sentences carefully and decide on their most suitable order.

- A. He started running in 1956.
 - B. Abebe Bikila was born in 1932.
 - C. He won the race easily.
 - D. In 1960, he ran the Marathon race in the Olympic Games in Rome.
- (NOE, 2000:20)

The students have to decide which sentence should come first, second, third and fourth by encircling the letters. This question obviously wants to see if the students can read the sentences and put them in a generally acceptable chronological order of a paragraph.

Deducing, comparing and contrasting are also assessed to a lesser extent with questions such as “Which one of the animals is the most intelligent?” and others.

On the whole, the Grade Eight national examinations do test a wide range of skills in the reading of English. Admittedly, due to the fact that the whole examination is multiple choice and provides four alternative answers, it encourages the students to guess. Moreover, it is an examination on which students could easily copy from one another, because the answers are simply a row of letters that stand for the correct alternative.

On the whole, several reading skills are tested in the examination. However, even though several of the skills used in reading are tested, unfortunately, the results of this examination cannot be used as a means of measuring the students' reading proficiency for this study. This is because there appears to be serious doubts on the validity and reliability of these examinations. One of the activities of the NOE is to "investigate the predictive validity and reliability of the public examinations, (MOE, 1998a:57). The Ministry of Education clearly state:

The existing assessment system has contributed very little in facilitating the teaching-learning process and in improving the state and quality of education. Therefore it is important to change the prevailing situation and introduce a modern assessment system in order to serve pedagogical improvement (1998a:58).

2.10 Testing Reading

To begin with what should be tested, it has been mentioned that reading is a skill composed of a multitude of sub-skills. Attempts at assessing as many of the sub-skills as possible have been made with the rationale of sampling as much as the students' sub-skills as possible to give a reflection of his reading skill. Such an approach is said to be based on the "Multidivisibility View" of reading that sees the various components as

individual independent aspects that have to be measured in their own right. However, such a view did not stand up to research. Urquhart and Weir (1998:125) explain:

In opposition to a multidivisibility view of reading, a substantial number of studies have found that it is not possible to differentiate between reading components, either through empirical demonstration of the separate functioning of such components when these are operationalised in language test items, or through the judgement of experts on what the focus of such test items actually is (see, e.g. Alderson, 1990a; Alderson and Lukmani, 1989; Carver, 1992; Rosenshine, 1980; Rost, 1993).

An opposing view to this is the “Unitary View”, which assumes that there is an underlying factor that affects all the components and measuring this gives one good indications of the students’ entire reading ability. Therefore, if one is able to devise a single reading test that can measure this underlying factor, then such a test could act as an accurate measure of all the other components. Although reassuring to the test-designer, in practice there tend to be two major groups upon which most other skills rest. One is the reader’s vocabulary stock and the second is his acquisition or mastery of the basic components of syntax, structure and other microlinguistic features that enable him to achieve the necessary threshold level to read a certain text. As a result, there is now some consensus that reading may not be multidivisible nor unitary but rather bi-divisible. Although measuring these two factors may not exhaustively measure or predict how good a reader may be at global and other types of reading, they can be considered as adequate for measuring fundamental reading skills. Research proves the importance of word recognition and vocabulary. Urquhart and Weir (1998:133) back up such an assertion:

It does seem improbable that students would be able to work out the main ideas of a text without some baseline competence in the microlinguistic skills, without understanding some of the relations within at least some sentences of that text.

Urquhart and Weir (1998:124) have repeated this elsewhere, saying that processing at the level of word recognition, lexical access, integration of textual information and resolution of ambiguity are important aspects of reading.

Some researchers like Grellet (1981:3) and Floyd (1984:90 – 91) divide reading into skimming, scanning, intensive reading and extensive reading. Urquhart and Weir (1998:123) provide us with a different matrix of reading types, based on previous work by Weir (1993) and Pugh (1978).

Global and Local reading are each sub-divided into expeditious or careful sub-components. The main skills and purposes of each are explained in the table below.

Table 3: **Matrix of reading types**

	Global	Local
Expeditious	A. Skimming quickly to establish discourse topic and main ideas. Search reading to locate quickly and understand information relevant to predetermined needs.	B. Scanning to locate specific information; symbol or group of symbols; names, dates, figures or words.
Careful	C. Reading carefully to establish accurate comprehension of the explicitly stated main ideas the author wishes to convey; propositional inferencing.	D. Understanding syntactic structure of sentence and clause. Understanding lexical and/or grammatical cohesion. Understanding lexis/ deducing meaning of lexical items from morphology and context.

Consequently, once the two factors of word recognition and lexical access had been selected as key areas to be measured, then features of a good reading test relevant for

Ethiopian students were thought over. Urquhart and Weir (1998:115-116) state that a good test would have to have as little reliance on cultural background as possible. This is to avoid the compensatory role students' background and cultural knowledge could have on their reading skills, allowing them to guess the meaning of the text from their cultural knowledge. It would not allow chance to be a factor in answering, as in multiple-choice questions. Therefore, it would also stay away from appreciation and other questions that are open-ended and could possibly have more than one answer. It would have a variety of passages to ensure reliability and validity, as well as minimising the advantages any one student may have on the contents of a passage. Finally, its main focus would be on comprehension on the local or microlinguistic level skills, as these are easily discriminated and can be measured with a relatively higher degree of confidence.

To conclude, Chapter Two has given a broad view of the role of reading in English in the Ethiopian education system by looking at learning materials in Ethiopia along with 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 ICDR was described. The Primary Reader Scheme and the selection of readers after an initial pilot scheme were discussed. This raised thought-provoking issues as to cultural familiarity and relevance of titles to be included in any future extensive reading schemes in Ethiopia. Choices made by schools indicate that titles ought to be selected based on the observed preferences of students. A working definition of reading and general approaches to teaching it was also discussed. The chapter gives an overview of how reading is considered and tested at the end of the

second cycle of primary education in Ethiopia. Chapter Three follows with a review of related literature, including what has been said about extensive reading schemes.