Teaching Global English- a Shift of Focus on Language Skills

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Abstract

The importance of English as a global language is unquestionable and to become a competent user of this language is demand of the time. English language learning in the simplest way can be defined as the development of the four language skills which enables the learners to integrate and use them through suitable strategies as the situation demands. This study investigates the tertiary level teachers’ perceptions about the importance and use of English language skills for academic and career needs of the learners in the teaching of English as a global language. This study was conducted as a pilot study of a major study on ‘Teachers’ perceptions about the teaching of English as a global language at the tertiary level education in Ethiopia’. The participants of the study were twenty three (23) tertiary level teachers of English from five universities in Ethiopia. They were served with fourteen (14) Likert scale items as a questionnaire to investigate their perceptions about the importance of different English language skills and the frequency of the use of these language skills for different purposes in academic and career contexts by the learners. The result shows that the teaching of English as a global language is a mere shift of focus on the language skills-listening and reading since global English itself is a pragmatic (media dominated) pedagogy in the use of English globally.

Key words: Global English, teachers’ perceptions, integrated skills, segregated skills, comprehension skills, productive skills, Likert-scale

Introduction

According to Crystal (2010), bringing global English into the classroom is essential if the purpose of English language teaching is to empower students to encounter the English speaking world with confidence. With regard to language teaching, there are two aspects to be considered; teaching comprehension and teaching production. However, the main impact of global English is in the teaching of comprehension that is, teaching listening comprehension and teaching reading comprehension.

This study aims at investigating the tertiary level teachers’ perceptions about the importance of different language skills in academic and career pursuits of the learners and the frequency of use of these skills at various situations so as to enable them to face the global English speaking world...
with confidence. The result shows that teaching of English as a global language in the classroom is a shift of focus on comprehension skills which has long been neglected in many non-native settings, especially in Ethiopia.

English has played a dominant and longstanding role as a medium of instruction in educational sector of Ethiopia. All universities in the country are supposed to use English as their working language; they ought to produce documents, hold meetings, write minutes and reports, etc. in English. The increasing use of English in most government and business sectors in Ethiopia, hence, demands a strong English language competency and mastery of the skills of comprehension and expression from the students coming out of universities (Negash, 2006).

In this context it is worthwhile to understand what the tertiary level teachers perceive about the importance of English language skills and their use for the learners in the context of English as a global language as teachers’ perceptions have great impact on the classroom instruction. Studies have been done on teaching language skills by Nunan (1992), Robinson (1991), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), and Yalden (1987). But in the background of globalization and the status of English as a global language, what the teachers perceive about the importance and use of these language skills to the students in their academic and career pursuits has not been addressed specifically so as to teach the language in a perspective different from that of a second or foreign language, especially in Ethiopian tertiary level education.

**Literature Review**

This study investigates the perceptions of Ethiopian tertiary level teachers about the emphasis and focus of English language skills for the learners in the teaching of English as a global language. So this literature review is organized to discuss matters concerned with English language skills in terms of comprehension skills and productive skills, segregated and integrated skill approach and finally the shift of emphasis on the skills in the context of teaching English as a global language.

By language skills, we mean, the way language is used (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992), and are traditionally conceived as consisting of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Skills are the building blocks and effective elements of language teaching and learning process. For effective communication in any language, we need these four skills. The natural way of learning our first language begins with **listening**, then **speaking**, after that **reading**, and finally **writing**.

**Comprehension and Productive skills**

The four English language skills are grouped in: receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). These dyads are also termed as comprehension skills and production skills (Crystal, 2003). Investigations into the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts of English learning have provided much insight into populations of learners and their specific learning goals. While some may need to speak and write English for academic
and professional purposes, others set out to develop conversational or reading skills. In certain context of English teaching and learning, preference was given to reading and writing while listening and speaking remain neglected. Thus it becomes essential to know about the fundamental factors such as the learner, the context and the resources in order to determine how particular skills are taught and learned (e.g., Breen, 2001; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000).

Krashen (1982) proposed that in language teaching, more effort should be devoted to developing learners’ comprehension competence than their productive competence. He claimed that learners’ productive ability will arise naturally from comprehension abilities. In particular, Krashen stressed that meaningful comprehension rather than focused production is all that is needed to facilitate language learning. Recent researches on second language acquisition, however, do not fully assume that productive skills will arise naturally from comprehension skills.

**Segregated and Integrated Skills approach**

Traditional English language teaching often resorted to the teaching of the four language skills separately, and materials and activities designed usually focused on one specific skill and others were ignored (Jing, 2006). In the past, listening and reading skills in English as a second language were not considered as much important as speaking and writing, but it was in the 1960’s when secondary skills came into fashion (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). The segregation of the skills is not consistent with the nature of language development in the first language context. In the first language context all language skills are interrelated. The interrelatedness of the language skills can be deduced from observation of a child’s development of oral and written language which follows the sequence of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this connection, Strang (1972) noted:

\[
\text{‘Listening precedes speaking and reading. Children acquire their native tongue through listening to and imitating the speech of their parents. Speaking is basic to both reading and writing.’ (p. 291)}
\]

In segregated skills approach, the mastery of discrete skills, such as reading and writing or reading and speaking are considered as the key to successful language learning and language learning is typically separated from content learning (Mohan, 1986).

However, research has shown that integrated skill approach is the natural way of learning a language. In real life, language skills are rarely used in isolation; it is a rare situation where one of the four skills occurs alone. For example, to engage in a conversation, one needs to be able to speak and comprehend at the same time. To make language learning as realistic as possible, instruction has to integrate language skills simultaneously which is a requisite in communication. “Often one skill will reinforce another; we learn to speak, for example, in part by modeling what we hear, and we learn to write by examining what we can read” (Brown, 2001). For instance, teaching reading can be easily tied to instruction on writing and vocabulary, and oral skills
readily lend themselves to teaching pronunciation, listening, and cross-cultural pragmatics (Hinkel, 2001; Lazaraton, 2001; McCarthy & O’Keeffe, 2004).

**Shift of focus on skills in a global language context**

In an age of globalization, when English has become a global language for communication, pragmatic objectives of language learning place an increased value on integrated and dynamic multi-skill instructional models with a focus on meaningful communication and the development of learners’ communicative competence (Hinkel, 2006, P:113). Moreover, most cross-cultural interactions take place between non-native speakers of English rather than between native and nonnative speakers (e.g., Canagarajah, 2005; Jenkins, 2000).

Most of these non-native speakers ‘don’t speak RP, don’t speak General American but they speak accents tinged with Chinese and Japanese and French and German and all the varieties let alone Welsh and Scottish and Irish, Liverpool and Birmingham and Cockney and all of those’(Crystal, 2012, in an interview). Since English truly is a global language (Crystal, 2003), all English language learners need to be prepared for future encounters with speakers of varieties of English that differ from their own (Jenkins, 2000, 2006). One way to prepare learners is to expose them to different varieties (Matsuda, 2003). Examples of different English varieties are available on the Internet, radio, television, and in different newspapers from around the world (Cook, 1999).

Crystal (2010)also points out the need of focusing on the comprehension skills (Listening and Reading) in instruction in the context of teaching English as a global language enabling the learners to familiarize themselves with the range of variations in the spoken and written language of English. It does not mean that productive skills (speaking & writing) be neglected but it should go on as it is being taught at present in different context. In production, nothing changes. One cannot produce all the varieties of English in the world. Global English does not have much impact there and it does not insist everybody has to speak one accent and one dialect. In short, in terms of production, global English doesn’t have much effect but in terms of comprehension it changes everything.

**Research Questions**

This study answers the following research question:

- What do the participant Ethiopian tertiary teachers feel about the importance of different language skills in the learners’ academic career needs?

- What do the participant teachers perceive about the use of English language skills for different purposes by the learners?

**Significance of the study**

Ethiopia is in a phase of developmental transitions. As international trade, investment, and communication in Ethiopia increase, those who can effectively interact in English with the rest
of the world will be best positioned to succeed. The urge for this has already been felt in the academic, career and social lives of the learners. In Ethiopia, university students have to do much academic reading in English. It is not only for university that students need mastery in English. They will also need the language for their career opportunities. In many professional environments, English skills and English proficiency are considered to be the essential requirements. For jobs in Education, the computer industry, journalism, film, public relations, English is no longer just a benefit but often a necessity. English is also playing a rather important role in the daily lives of the modern Ethiopian youths. For example; turn on the radio, TV, computer or surf the internet; English turns out to be a strong media language for communication. In this study learners’ needs of different English language skills are approached on the basis of academic and career needs apart from the role they play in the lives of the learners. So this study can reflect the actual needs of the learners in a globalised society and the necessity to shift the focus of language skills learning in the existing situation in Ethiopian tertiary education.

Methodology
This study is both qualitative and quantitative based on literature review and a questionnaire survey conducted on 23 tertiary level teachers of English from 5 universities in Ethiopia. The questionnaire survey contained 14 Likert- scale items, divided into two sections. Likert-type or frequency scales use fixed choice response formats and are designed to measure attitudes or opinions (McLeod, 2008). These ordinal scales measure levels of agreement/disagreement. So, in this study this valid measurement instrument is used.

In the first section the shifting focus of the four skills in learners’ academic and career needs is addressed. A five-point Likert- scale (5= very important, 4= important, 3= somewhat important, 2= not important, 1= unnecessary) was used. The second section contains 10 Likert-scale items requiring the frequency of learners’ use of the skills in different contexts for both academic and career needs (5= always, 4= usually, 3= often, 2= sometimes, 1= rarely). The first two contexts are related to listening skills, next two are of speaking skills, and then three following contexts are related to reading skills and the last three represent writing skills. In both sections, the responses and their ‘Mean’ are taken to comprehend the data and for clear analysis.

The Participants
This study was supported by 23 tertiary level teachers from 5 universities including the university where the researcher worked for two years. Most of the instructors were fresh graduates who got entry into university undergraduate teaching through a national competitive test. Of the 23 instructors, 18 held Bachelor of Arts degree and 5 held Master’s Degree in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language and 3 had teaching diploma and were senior members. All of them taught English Language to undergraduate students in the first year of their study. Masters’ degree holders also taught English main students other than English language general course to students with other subjects such as science, commerce, business
studies and computer. The researcher’s choice of this population for data collection proved to be very useful in this study because most of them were fresh graduate instructors who held the fervor of learners’ expectations from teachers and their reflection on the questionnaire items were free from any pretense.

Result
The participants’ responses to the questionnaire are presented below based on the importance and frequency of use of the skills in academic and career needs in tables 1 and 2. The first table presents data about teachers’ perceptions about the importance of different skills in academic and career needs of the learners.

Table 1. Teachers’ perceptions about the importance of different English language skills in academic and career needs of the learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Unnecessary</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1. Teachers’ perceptions about the importance of different English language skills in academic and career needs of the learners

The data in table 1 and fig.1 show that of the four language skills, listening skill (overall mean=4.3), followed by reading (overall mean=4.2) have been perceived to be the most
important skill for both academic and career needs of the students. On the other hand, speaking skill (overall mean=3.8) viewed important in career and writing skill (overall mean=3.5) viewed important in academics, altogether have been viewed important but not as much as listening and reading by the participant teachers.

Table 2. Teachers’ perceptions about the use of English language skills for different purposes by the learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contexts</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to lectures</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking face-to-face</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the telephone</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Books &amp; journals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading letters, faxes or e-mail</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading News papers &amp; reports</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing letters, faxes or e-mail</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing notes &amp; reports</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing papers for a journal etc.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings with regard to the frequency and use of the language skills, the participant teachers perceive that listening and reading skills are used frequently by the students. Especially, listening to lectures (mean=3.5) and reading books, journals, letters, e-mails, newspapers (mean= 3.3) are the highest frequency contexts where the participants feel that their students use listening and reading skills for academic purposes. In these contexts, speaking and writing skills score a frequency of use (mean) = 2.5 and 2.7 respectively.

Whereas, listening to lectures (mean=3.2) and reading letters, newspapers, reports, e-mail etc. (mean =3.3) are the peak contexts where the students use listening and reading skills for career needs. In career needs, the use of skills such as speaking (mean=3.0) and writing (3.0) also rank close to the comprehension skills in the contexts of speaking face to face and writing notes respectively.

Discussion
It is apparent from the data analysis that comprehension skills (listening & reading) are perceived to have a priority over productive skills such as speaking and writing. The result is in conformation with what Crystal (2010) points out that global English in classroom prepares the learners to face the English speaking world with confidence and that global English gives focus to the comprehension skills. So, it is evident from the analysis of the data that comprehension skills are more important than productive skills. It is also true that only when we comprehend well, we can produce meaningful output. Since the rapid spread of English as a global language
gives rise to varieties of English as it is used by people with different first languages, it is the demand of the time to make the students aware of these varieties by enabling to listen to and read a lot of English from different parts of the world.

Interestingly enough, all the language skills have been perceived by the subjects to be important regardless of being used frequently or not. However, there was an agreement in perceiving listening and reading skills to be at the top in terms of both frequency of use and importance. The role of global English in classroom teaching and the shift of focus on language skills are conspicuous from this study. There is immense hue and cry over bringing a global English pedagogy for the classroom but it is obvious that global English in itself a practical pedagogy for global use of English and the point here is the shift of focus on the comprehension skills.

Limitations
This study is limited in the sense that it takes into account only the perceptions of the tertiary teachers. If students’ actual needs are considered, it will surely add depth to this study. Moreover, the population from whom the data was collected is quite small and could have been widened. Further, this study is hoped to give some insight into the teaching of English as a global language. In Ethiopia, English has a wide coverage of functionality as a sole medium (or side by side with Amharic) in education, business and trade interactions and transactions, media and communication, etc. However, despite such a wide spread and ‘multispectral’ use of English, the appropriateness and accuracy of the English in use is low. So this study may pave way for further researches on students’ needs in a globalised society and can add to the quality of English language education and training in Ethiopia.

Conclusion
To sum up, the current study explored teachers’ perceptions about the importance and use of English language skills for the students’ academic and career needs in the context of teaching English as a global language. The result shows that teaching global English doesn’t require a new pedagogical approach but a shift of focus on the language skills as the time demands. The need of the hour is to prepare students competent enough to face the English speaking world for which they have to comprehend the world which entails the necessity of shifting the focus on comprehension skills in language pedagogy as well as to face the challenges of the globe which this language has conquered.

References


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