EXAMINING TEXT AND CONTEXT IN THE ETHIOPIAN ENGLISH CLASSROOM: A FOCUS ON SECOND CYCLE GRADES SEVEN AND EIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the contribution of teachers and students in designing grade seven and eight English texts. The analysis of the texts focused on the power dynamics and level of freedom afforded to teachers and students in creating contextually relevant materials. A mixed-method approach was employed to gather comprehensive data for the research. Following data collection, a descriptive analysis method was utilized to identify specific contexts in which the texts were written and to evaluate the extent of influence and agency granted to teachers and students. The overarching goal of this research was to explore the role and power dynamics between teachers, students, and the context within the design of English texts for grade seven and eight learners. The findings revealed a significant disparity between the designed texts and a natural English learning environment as a foreign language. The involvement of teachers and students in the text design process was limited. Based on these findings, recommendations are provided to enhance English as a Foreign Language text, particularly for grades seven and eight. The results of this study can offer valuable insights for educational administrators, syllabus designers, material developers, teachers, and learners alike.

Keywords: Text, Context, Contextualization, Classroom, Power, Freedom

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, foreign and second language researchers have been turning their attention to the interplay between classroom texts and the social or school context, exploring how these texts were contextualized to facilitate meaningful, interesting, and effective language learning (Ahmed, 2017; Lukin, 2017). The concept of "context" encompassed both the social and natural environment of learners, as well as the relationship between language and social interaction (Halliday, 1978)

In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), language was viewed as a semiotic system that reflected social functions and meanings (Liu, 2014; Fontaine, 2013). Understanding the role of context was crucial from multiple perspectives. It highlighted the link between language and social reality, emphasized the significance of the language classroom as a site for sociolinguistic research, and prompted critical inquiries into education and curriculum design (Apple, 2004).

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the interplay between context and classroom text within the Ethiopian English classroom. The term "classroom text" encompassed the use of language for academic, heuristic, skills development, and communication purposes. The study placed learners at the forefront of the investigation, recognizing the significance of contextualization in relating classroom texts to their real-life experiences.

The efficacy of language learning was strongly influenced by the context in which it took place, as learners actively participated in inquiry-based approaches to tackle practical issues within their communities (Chacoff, 1989). This contextualization aligned with the principles of critical pedagogy, as advocated by Paulo Freire, emphasizing the importance of integrating real-life experiences and societal concerns into the classroom to facilitate genuine and meaningful learning experiences.

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relationship between classroom texts, social context, and effective language learning, drawing upon perspectives from systemic functional linguistics, sociolinguistics, and critical pedagogy.

Background
In the field of English language teaching (ELT), contextualization refers to the process of embedding language learning materials and activities within meaningful and authentic contexts. It involves linking language instruction to

real-life situations, cultural elements, and learners' experiences. The purpose of contextualization is to provide learners with opportunities to use and understand language in relevant and practical ways.

Research conducted in various countries has highlighted the importance of contextualization in language learning. Studies, like the one conducted by Korkmaz and Korkmaz (2013) in Turkey, have found that contextualization enables students to prepare more effective lessons and utilize different techniques. By connecting language learning to meaningful contexts, students are better able to apply their knowledge and improve their proficiency.

Curricular contextualization plays a significant role in bridging the gap between theory and practice. It helps students relate educational tasks to their existing knowledge and everyday experiences (Mouraz and Leite, 2013). This approach allows learners to attribute meaning and value to what they learn in school, making the curriculum more meaningful and relevant to their lives.

The interplay between text and context is another important aspect to consider. According to Zhao Y. et al. (2015), texts are language in action within specific situations, and contexts are constructed through the range of texts produced within a community. This perspective emphasizes that ideas, knowledge, thoughts, and culture are not solely dependent on language but are waiting to be expressed within a contextualized setting.

To implement contextualization effectively, a contextualized teaching and learning strategy (CTL) is recommended. CTL, also known as Contextualized Instruction, focuses on connecting foundational language skills with academic or occupational content by emphasizing concrete applications within specific contexts of interest to the learners (Mazzeo, 2008; Medrich, Calderon, and Hoachlander, 2003). This approach emphasizes teaching in a hands-on, real-world context rather than relying solely on abstract instruction.

In the Ethiopian context, English is predominantly taught as a foreign language rather than being used as a native language for daily conversation. As a result, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Ethiopia differs significantly from natural English as a Second Language (ESL) learning environments.

Limited research on contextualization exists in the Ethiopian context. Some studies, such as Tilahun's (2016) exploration of English textbooks for grade twelve students, have shed light on teachers' and students' perceptions of the textbooks but did not specifically address the issue of contextualization. Another study by Abraha (2008) examined Grade 11 English textbooks and highlighted the lack of quality exercises for genuine communication, skills

presentation, and alignment with learners' interests and culture. These studies emphasize the need for further research on the integration of text and context.

It is important to note that implementing contextualization in the classroom may face challenges. Teachers need to develop creative and effective teaching and learning strategies, find ways to connect abstract content to concrete experiences, and navigate curricula that prioritize high-stakes testing. Additionally, teachers must help learners adjust to a different instructional approach and manage the energy levels required for a more active and engaging classroom (Predmore, 2005).

Conducting research in the Ethiopian EFL context would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of contextualization, the impact of context on language learning outcomes, and the integration of authentic and meaningful texts in the classroom. By exploring these areas, researchers can contribute to making English language learning in Ethiopia more authentic, interesting, and motivating for learners.

Statement of the Problem

The literature on English language teaching (ELT) covers various aspects such as literature in language teaching, discourse analysis, and communicative approaches. Previous studies have evaluated EL textbooks in different countries, but the role of teachers and students in content selection and text design has received limited attention. In Ethiopia, English is taught as a foreign language, but students often struggle to effectively use and understand the language. The selection of texts is a contributing factor. Texts play a crucial role in ELT, impacting proficiency, guiding instruction, and promoting successful teaching. This study aimed to analyze and evaluate recently developed texts for grades seven and eight in Ethiopia, focusing on content selection, syllabus design, and the context of ELT and materials development. The study aimed to:

1. Examine the integration of the social and natural environments or context of Grade seven and eight English learners into their classroom texts.
2. Investigate the role, power, and freedom of teachers in contextualizing Grade seven and eight texts, both in the syllabus and classroom text design processes.

Theoretical Framework that Guides this Study
Language has been studied for centuries, often through frameworks like Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and critical discourse analysis. SFL explores language's social functions and context, analyzing phonetics,

phonology, lexicogrammar, and semantics. Critical discourse analysis examines how texts are shaped by ideology and power dynamics. In language teaching, the text-based approach emphasizes understanding text organization and writer choices within specific contexts. Context is crucial for interpreting texts, considering social, situational, and cultural factors. SFL views language as functional, meaning-oriented, context-dependent, and a semiotic process. This study focuses on the text-context relationship when designing English texts for Ethiopian academic settings, taking into account the power and freedom of teachers and students.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Setting
This study focused on the Oromia Region State Education Bureau (ORSEB) and the East and West Guji and Borana Zone second cycle (grades seven and eight) teachers and students. It aimed to investigate the utilization of syllabus design and materials development in English texts for Ethiopian students. The study examined whether the materials considered the learners' language learning context, linguistic theory, and the power and freedom of teachers and students in task design and materials development.

Sample and sampling techniques
This study utilized multi-stage sampling techniques. Firstly, the Oromia Region State Education Bureau cluster division was used to form four clusters (A, B, C, and D). One cluster consisting of six zones and four towns was purposively selected. Secondly, three zones (East and West Guji and Borana) were purposively chosen due to their relatively marginalized status in education coverage. A total of 50 schools were selected from these three zones. Finally, 203 teachers and sample students were randomly selected from the sampled schools in the three zones.

Instruments of Data Collection
Data for this study were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and questionnaires. FGDs involved qualitative discussions among grades seven and eight students, guided by a moderator. Questionnaires were given to English teachers and students to assess their perspectives on language teaching materials, principles, and pedagogical practices. The study included teachers from 50 schools in East and West Guji and Borana Zones, with questionnaires distributed purposefully to ensure a representative sample.

Methods of Data Analysis

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative analytical procedures were used for the analysis. Descriptive statistics, frequencies, and percentages were

employed to analyze the quantitative data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of students FGD

The research approach employed in this study was a mixed-method approach, which involved collecting data using both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the research questions (Tashakkori and Teddlie, and Creswell 2007). Qualitative data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), while quantitative data was obtained through questionnaires. The findings are presented sequentially, starting with the results from the FGDs.

The primary objective of the FGDs was to explore the incorporation of the social and natural environments or context of Grade seven and eight English learners into their classroom texts, as well as to understand the students' feelings about the texts they were taught and evaluated on. FGDs involve assembling a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw insights from their complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes through moderated interactions.

The majority of respondents expressed that the existing English texts for grades seven and eight had good activities. However, there were also groups of students who considered the activities to be shallow or of medium difficulty, and some found them still challenging. Based on these responses, it can be inferred that the texts are partially aligned with the students' proficiency levels. Notably, it was observed that students who attended private schools during lower grades perceived the texts as less difficult.

Considering the diverse perspectives expressed, it becomes evident that no language is truly easy to learn, as all languages have equal complexity. Any simple aspects of a language are always balanced by more challenging and less intuitive features. Therefore, it can be concluded from the FGD responses that learners worldwide share common characteristics. When acquiring new skills, they may naturally feel apprehensive about applying them publicly, as learners are often reluctant to make errors in front of their peers. Anxiety is a common factor in learning a new language (Landström, 2015). Wu (2010) and Zheng (2008) argue that overcoming language anxiety is essential, as it is a significant impediment to foreign language learning.

The subsequent focus of the discussion revolved around incorporating students' voices in text design and addressing practical issues to move towards a more transformative future. The framework used to explore and critique the notion of voice primarily involves deconstructing the assumptions of the present and addressing the overlooked challenges in student voice work. The findings from the FGDs indicated that students' interests were not adequately addressed in the texts. When asked about their interests, the responses highlighted the need for texts to be designed after considering their input, such as cultural content (Gadaa, Siqqee, Irreechaa) and environmental topics (minerals, forests), among others.

Furthermore, the FGD teams of grade seven and eight students agreed that the content of the texts did not sufficiently emphasize the importance of knowledge for a comprehensive understanding of the texts and the learning context. They believed that learning requires more than just comprehensibility, although comprehensibility serves as a gatekeeper. As language teachers, we share their sentiments and firmly believe that well-designed texts should consistently incorporate various elements and features to help learners locate and utilize the material effectively. Some texts may have more of these features and clearer cues than others, and previewing a course text can assist students in identifying these text features and using them efficiently.

Similarly, the FGD team expressed that the texts were not fully helpful in terms of the exercises, activities, beliefs, and ways of life that students engage within their day-to-day lives. Freire (1996) argued that within any teaching and learning context, progressive educators have opportunities to employ critical pedagogy as a means to counteract the effects of banking education.

Progressive educators must incorporate real-life experiences into their classrooms. They should critically examine everyday life and, together with the learners, analyze the alarming facts and inconsistencies within our democratic society. It is important to expose learners to instances of discrimination based on race, class, and gender that occur in their daily lives, as well as examples of disrespect towards public institutions, acts of violence, and arbitrary behavior. These examples should be carefully analyzed to reveal their contradictory nature, which undermines the inherent inclination of men and women to strive for improvement, a fundamental aspect of our historical development. Additionally, these examples challenge the authenticity of democratic life. A democracy that allows discrimination and disrespect to persist without consequences still has much to learn and address in order to refine itself.

Although it may not be possible to achieve a perfect democracy where such disrespect does not exist, continuous efforts should be made to foster a society that strives for greater respect and equality.

In the Ethiopian context, Freire's critical pedagogy holds significant importance. It offers students the chance to critically examine the social constructs that shape their reality, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of the constructed nature of Ethiopian society. By questioning these constructs, students can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to actively participate in the reconstruction of Ethiopian society. Freire's recommendation to text designers, teachers, communities, and all stakeholders in Ethiopia is to prioritize the inclusion of existing social realities in educational materials. It is crucial to avoid relying solely on politically biased or fictional content that does not accurately reflect the Ethiopian context. By embracing the realities on the ground, Ethiopian society can avoid being led astray and colonized by foreign cultures. Instead, it can foster a sense of cultural authenticity and empower its citizens to shape a prosperous and inclusive future.

The findings of the teachers' questionnaire

As previously mentioned, the research was conducted as a survey, and the number of sample respondents was not as extensive as desired. The development of any language syllabus or curriculum is influenced by various factors such as environment, culture, politics, teachers, students, and the community. Therefore, the investigation aimed to explore the power and role of teachers in the process of syllabus development, determining whether they acted as decision-makers or not. In this regard, (Al-Kathiri, 2016) explained that for a curriculum to align with a nation's goals and meet the students' needs, it is logical for teachers to be involved in its creation. Teacher contribution has long been associated with curriculum design.

The research questionnaire was designed to gather additional data related to two research questions: to assess the sentiments of Grade seven and eight English teachers regarding the prevailing contextualization and classroom texts they were using, and to investigate the role, freedom, and power of teachers in contextualizing the Grade seven and eight texts during the syllabus and classroom text design processes. Therefore, a total of 203 grade seven and eight English teachers participated in the study as implementers of the syllabus.

Table 1: Role/power of Teachers

No	Items	Always		Frequently		Sometime		Rarely		Never	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Have a role in syllable design as a part of decision making.	31	15	28	14	47	23	37	18	60	30
2	The partners in the process of syllable design.	23	11	26	13	45	22	50	25	59	29
3	Your opinions and ideas are incorporated.	43	21	45	22	42	21	40	20	33	16

Source: Survey Data, 2019; F-Frequency; % = Percent

Based on the data provided in the table, the responses to the first question indicate that the majority of respondents (60, or 30%) agree that they have no role or power in syllabus design and decision-making. This exclusion of teachers' voices in the syllabus design process contradicts the principles of effective syllabus design, as teachers are not given the freedom to participate in selecting teaching materials that enhance student understanding.

From the data, it can be inferred that the respondents believe that teaching and learning are more effective when teachers take responsibility for their own teaching, rather than being controlled by information provided by experts from the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the majority of respondents hold the belief that teaching and learning would improve if teachers were properly involved in the decision-making process.

As highlighted throughout this study, teachers in Ethiopia are increasingly recognized not only as educators but also as contributors to curriculum design

and development. However, despite this recognition, they are often disregarded by the Ethiopian government in the decision-making process.

Regarding the second item, 59 respondents (29%) stated that they are not considered partners in the syllabus design process and are merely passive observers, as if their role is not crucial for consultation and receiving feedback before and during the syllabus design phase. This response implies that teachers are viewed as mere recipients of a curriculum developed by specialists elsewhere; limiting their role to correctly implementing what has been developed by these specialists. This top-down approach undermines the process of teachers taking ownership of the curriculum.

Table 2: Teachers as a Part of Society

SN	Item	Always		Frequently		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
4	Considered as a part of the environment that affects the curriculum.	29	14	30	15	49	24	38	19	57	28
5	Your essentiality in meeting the needs of society.	46	23	30	15	45	22	32	16	50	25
6	Act and reflect on society's needs in each stage of the development process.	42	21	26	13	40	20	39	19	56	28
7	Demand your voices to be heard to ensure the levels of success in society.	36	18	27	13	49	24	45	22	46	23
8	Independence to contribute to the development of your particular society through education.	40	20	38	19	57	28	41	20	27	13

Source: Survey Data, 2019 F: Frequency %: Percent

As discussed in the literature review of this study, proponents of teachers' involvement in curriculum change, particularly in the Ethiopian context, argue that teachers should have the opportunity to contribute their voices before the actual implementation of the curriculum. Their input should be sought during

the initial curriculum development stages. The aforementioned response

highlights that, despite Ethiopia's longstanding tradition of educational freedom, government decisions regarding "what knowledge is of most worth" still dominate the curriculum development process, from its inception to student assessment.

Based on the data provided in the table, it can be observed that 57 respondents (28%) feel that they are not considered by the syllabus designing team as part of the curriculum environment. However, curriculum implementation cannot occur without the active participation of teachers in the planning process. Teachers play a central role in curriculum development and implementation, along with other factors such as learners, resources, school environment, culture, supervision, and assessment.

In line with the curriculum design paradigm, teachers must be involved in curriculum planning and development to effectively implement and adapt the curriculum to suit the needs of their learners and environment. The role and influence of teachers in this process are undeniable.

However, the table indicates that teachers are not seen as pivotal in the curriculum planning process but rather as participants in the implementation phase. To enable teachers to participate in curriculum planning, they must have a good understanding of the curriculum document or syllabus to effectively implement it in their specific context.

Regarding the fifth item, 50 respondents (25%) agree, knowingly or unknowingly, that their involvement in the text design process is not essential for meeting the needs of society. This suggests that teachers believe they are deliberately excluded by policymakers who make decisions solely based on their perception of society's needs. Teachers seem to accept this systemic segregation and lack of involvement in curriculum development.

However, a successful educational program and effective curriculum development should aim to meet the needs and expectations of the culture, society, and population being served. Therefore, curriculum development and educational reform should continuously undergo review, revision, and adaptation to meet societal needs. The involvement of all stakeholders, especially those directly involved in student instruction like teachers, is crucial for successful curriculum development and revision.

Similarly, for question six, 56 respondents (28%) express the same sentiment as in question five. Most teachers believe that policymakers are not allowing them to participate in the syllabus design process and contribute to addressing

society's needs at each stage of development. Teachers are expected to act and reflect on society's needs during the curriculum development process, but sometimes the process itself is unclear.

In response to question seven, 49 respondents (24%) sometimes demand their voices to be heard during syllabus development, recognizing that their active participation ensures success in society. However, 46 respondents (23%) never demand their voices to be heard. The process of curriculum development requires teachers to act and reflect on society's needs at each stage. However, the approach to teacher participation in the process is often ill-defined and challenging, leading to difficulties for teachers in engaging with curriculum development.

On the other hand, the majority of respondents (57, or 28%) in question eight feel that they have the independence to make decisions and contribute to the development of their environment/society through education. Teachers are seen as key agents of change in achieving sustainable development through education. Active participation of teachers in all aspects of education is necessary, as they can foster ethics for sustainable living, social justice, democracy, peace, and ecological integrity. Moreover, teachers can facilitate interdisciplinary and contextualized knowledge integration to create a more holistic understanding.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the existing English texts for grades seven and eight in Ethiopia need further refinement to better cater to the diverse proficiency levels of students. Language anxiety poses a significant obstacle to language learning and should be addressed to facilitate effective language acquisition. Involving students in the text design process and incorporating their voices and interests, along with incorporating clear cues and text features, can enhance comprehension and engagement with the texts. Embracing the realities of Ethiopian society in educational materials and ensuring teachers' active involvement in curriculum development are crucial for creating an inclusive and effective educational system.

In summary, prioritizing the inclusion of social realities in educational materials can foster cultural authenticity and empower citizens to shape a prosperous and inclusive future. Teachers' voices and contributions should be valued in the syllabus design and decision-making processes, as they play a central role in adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of learners and the local context. Policymakers should recognize the importance of teachers' involvement and create clear processes for their active participation. By empowering teachers and embracing their role as agents of change, Ethiopia can foster ethics, social justice, democracy, peace, and ecological integrity

through education.

Recommendations

To improve English education in grades seven and eight in Ethiopia, it is recommended to tailor the English texts to meet the diverse needs of learners by incorporating clear cues and text features that enhance understanding and engagement. Additionally, addressing language anxiety is crucial by creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that encourages student practice and celebrates mistakes as learning opportunities. Involving students in the text design process, considering their voices, interests, and relevant social realities, will foster cultural authenticity and increase engagement. Active teacher participation in curriculum development should be ensured, valuing their input and expertise in selecting materials and contextualizing the curriculum to meet local needs. Finally, recognizing teachers as agents of change and empowering them to contribute to education's impact on ethics, social justice, democracy, peace, and ecological integrity is essential.

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