

1. Major Factors Affecting the Use of Active Learning Techniques in Teaching Speaking and Writing Skills to Freshman Students in EFL Classrooms of Three Ethiopian Universities

1Dr. Kitaw Joseph, 2Dr. Tilahun Negash

1. Department of English, Debre markos University,
Ethiopia, E-mail: yosephzewdu@gmail.com
2. Department of English, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia

Abstract

The major objective of the study was to explore the factors influencing the use of active learning techniques in teaching speaking and writing skills in EFL classrooms. To achieve this objective, qualitative research approach was followed for the data generation and analysis. The participants of the study were 27 EFL instructors and 17 focus group discussions with students in the freshman program (85 students) in three public universities (University of Gondar, Debre Markos University and Bahir Dar University). After analyzing the interview transcripts using content analysis techniques, two key findings emerged out of the themes. The students' related variables were poor English language background, negative associations with language learning, content irrelevance of English language support courses, and dependency in group work. On the side of EFL instructors, the problems were poor classroom management, lack of administrative support from universities, low perceptions regarding active learning approaches, and the adverse influence of the external social environments. In conclusion, it was found out that the EFL classroom is influenced negatively by many factors of which the major ones are the aforementioned. Thus, these drawbacks need serious attention of the stakeholders to resolve the problems.

Key words: Teaching, Productive English skills, Active Learning Techniques

1. Introduction

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education indicated in the education policy that the poor level of English at all levels of the education system was a serious problem (MoE, 2002: 113). Based on a survey study conducted in various Ethiopian public universities in 2007, serious weaknesses

were identified among graduates in their speaking and writing proficiency in English language (MoE, 2007). It was reported that the students struggled to produce and edit written texts and that their verbal interactions in academic and work environments were ineffective. In response to these disconcerting findings, a draft curriculum was prepared by a government taskforce and, after being approved by the ministry of education, became operational in September 2009 across all the universities in the country. It was hoped that the new curriculum would alleviate the challenges discovered in the survey study.

However, after the reform became operational for years, the desired changes were not observed. For example, in a study, the Ministry of Education revealed that both students and their instructors continued to experience considerable difficulty in using English for academic and communicative functions; English language was viewed as a barrier to learning in higher education institutions (Getnet, 2016: 13). In this study, the MoE described the quality of English language education and training as poor, and declared that the requisite learning objectives were not achieved satisfactorily.

The study went on to explain that the modes of course delivery, objectives, course content, tasks and activities, assessment and evaluation, and course duration (among others) were all factors contributing to the challenges experienced in English language classrooms. It was further emphasized that these elements were not being implemented in accordance with the reforms outlined in the 1992 education policy. From this, it can be inferred that the methods of teaching English language and its assessment in Ethiopian education remain inadequate to encourage the proper development of English, from primary level right through to tertiary level. Furthermore, based on the researchers' observations of the existing practices in the EFL classrooms in the universities and informal talks with the students and instructors, it seems that there has not been any significant achievement in lessening the aforementioned problems observed in EFL classrooms. Both the instructors and students have hinted a challenge on using active learning techniques effectively in their EFL classrooms.

2. Statement of the Problem

Teaching and learning English as a foreign language has been a challenging for both teachers and their students in Ethiopia. Since the language is limited to the classroom and not

used for social communication away from school environment (Saville-Troike, 2006), there is little progress and too much frustration. The learning environment does not give students varied and extensive language input in order to use the language effectively. As the students use their mother tongue as a dominant means of communication in the social and school environment, there is little chance to use English away from the classroom. Students need a lot of practice in an authentic environment to use their productive skills (Dueraman, 2012). According to Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, output plays a complementary role to input in a language learning process (Beniss & Bazzaz, 2014). That means, if students engage in speaking and writing to communicate with others, it will help them to internalize the language items they received in listening and writing and to become more fluent and accurate in using the language. However, if students do not get extra input at home or in their village, they do not have a chance to use their English for meaningful purposes. This problem makes the students to be de-motivated to learn English. For instance, Iranian students perceive English as a burden and a difficult task to study (Yule, 1996: 192; Behabadi & Behfrouz, 2013: 80).

Moreover, teaching English using techniques in which both the teachers and students do not have trust brings even more challenges. As Pundak and Rosner (2008:153) indicate, when instructors are faced with new ways of teaching methods, they are not ready to take risks in attempting innovations as they experience a threatening feeling of uncertainty, and may resort to their previous methods of teaching. The same kind of feeling could be also observed in the students. Students would like to follow their previous learning style as far as they were comfortable with it and they may like to be in a teacher-centered classroom to follow their lesson passively.

As Camenson (2007: 16) presents, teacher related variables such as teaching methods, classroom management and teaching materials influence the EFL instruction. Similarly, student-related variables like motivation, type of language learning material, and other affective variables are likely to influence the teaching of productive language skills in an EFL classroom (*ibid*). Therefore, identifying these hindrances is very important to better understand the teaching of productive language skills in EFL classrooms.

This study was born out of the two researchers' concern about the use of active learning techniques in teaching productive language skills in English language support courses to first-year

undergraduate students. As such, it focused on factors which affect the use of active learning techniques in teaching speaking and writing skills in English language support courses - i.e., Communicative English Skills (EnLa 1011) and Basic Writing Skills (EnLa 1012); these courses are offered in two semesters to first-year undergraduate students in Ethiopian public universities.

In line with the title of the research, the following were the key research questions answered in the progress of the study.

1. What are the student-related factors which affect the teaching of speaking and writing skills using active learning in EFL classrooms?
2. What are the instructors-related factors which affect the teaching of speaking and writing skills using active learning in EFL classrooms?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

The major purpose of the study was to assess the factors which affect the use of active learning techniques in teaching productive language skills in EFL classrooms. To achieve this objective, qualitative approach was followed in the data generation and analysis process. The study used phenomenology research design since it was useful in understanding and inferring the meanings that participants of a study relate to their day-to-day experience in the teaching and learning process (Ridenour & Newman, 2008: 86).

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 27 EFL instructors who used to teach English Language support courses in the three public universities (DebreMarkos University, Bahir Dar University and University of Gonder) and 85 first year students assigned in various departments who took these courses in the respective universities. The students were organized into 17 groups for focus group discussion. The participants of the study were selected using purposive sampling technique in giving relevant information.

3.3 Instruments

In order to generate the data to answer the research questions, classroom observation, individual interviews, and focus-group discussions were employed. Thus, 10 classroom visits, 27 individual interviews with EFL instructors and 17 focus-group discussions (85 students) were made to generate data. In all the data generation and analysis process, the institutional ethical guidelines and procedures were followed. Using the above instruments, the data generation process was done until data saturation level to answer the research questions. The data analysis procedure followed theme formation techniques under content analysis in line with qualitative research approach.

4. Results and Discussion

After collecting the data, qualitative analysis was done to answer the research questions raised in the statement of the problem. The following section presents the results of the study and the discussion. The participants of the interview and focus group discussion were asked a set of related questions to delve deep into the issue under investigation. After transcribing the interview data and following the formation of themes, the following sub-themes were identified.

4.1 Findings

4.1.1. Student-related Variables

This theme is related to research question number one. It tries to explore major problems or challenges that may affect the use of active learning approaches in the EFL classrooms. These were students' English language background, students' negative psychological associations with language learning, and dependency in group work,

□ Students' Poor English Language Background

This was the main challenge that the participants revealed as an obstacle to the teaching and learning process in higher institutions. They asserted that, nowadays, students join university with little knowledge of English language. They further commented that the nature of language teaching at the primary and secondary school is not helpful for students to develop their productive skills. The focus was said to be on the grammar and reading passages so that the students can be prepared for the classroom tests and national examinations. Hence the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) were said to be not treated equally. Moreover, students' upbringing also affects their classroom interaction with others. For example, Serbessa (2006: 132) mentions that the Ethiopian upbringing or socialization does not encourage free discussion

and interaction, and as a result it is likely to play a negative role in the implementation of active and reflective teaching approaches in order to make students problem solvers. As a result, most of them tend to be introvert.

When students learn English as a foreign language, they have little exposure to speaking or writing texts out of their classrooms. As English is mostly used for academic purpose, not for other social communication out of academic context (Jamshidnejad, 2011: 14), students have low input from the environment to develop their skills. This will be a challenge for students to use the language for communicative purposes (Grabe, and Stoller, 2009: 445). The contextual opportunity that is found in second language learning is not found in learning a foreign language. They learn it in an artificial environment, in classrooms, where neither the teachers nor their students had any experience with native speakers. Generally, students' proficiency and fluency in using English is very low since they do not learn the language in an authentic environment and for spontaneous communication (Jamshidnejad, 2011:16). Poor background of English is also related to low academic performance of students joining freshman programme (Tesera, Shumet & Demeke, 2010: 55; Kahsay, 2012: 116). This becomes a barrier for students' academic success at the freshman programme.

□ *Students' Negative Associations with Language Learning*

As Walters (2007: 56) states, getting awareness about the psychological conditions of students towards the teaching and learning process is very important to be effective in achieving their objectives. That is to say the EFL teachers have to identify the perception of students towards the EFL classroom, and what motivates or de-motivates them in the language instruction. This will help the language teachers to better organize and satisfy the needs of students. Some psychological variables like attitude, confidence, awareness and doubt are vital elements in the students' academic lives (*Ibid*). The most important skill students have to develop in higher education is not just cramming content, but learning about how to learn, how to use information efficiently and how to apply their skills to novel and unpredictable situations (Walters, 2007: 56). Thus, students should be guided on how to approach their learning, or be aware of relevant learning strategies and styles. In relation to the findings of this study, negative psychological associations were the other challenges that the participants of the

study mentioned as a problem for English language learning. The n e g a t i v e psychological associations mentioned were low motivation to learn English language, absence of self-confidence to use English, lack of commitment to study, and high interest only in scores or grades they get.

These psychological variables could harm the language learning process. For instance, Grabin (2007: 139) states that students are interested to engage in only what is necessary to get good grade than the language skills they are expected to learn in the teaching and learning process. That is to say, students do not focus on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they have to develop.

As Jamshidnejad (2011: 8) points out by reviewing others' research findings, students' fear of making mistakes in using English in front of their teachers and friends is considered as a learning barrier in an EFL instruction. This is because students do not practice using English with freedom. As a result, they do not see progress, and do not learn the language without making mistakes. They do not see errors as a sign of language learning. These are serious challenges that affect the teaching and learning process negatively.

This is similar to the findings of Doyle (2008: 20-21) who reports "learning is not a top reason that students give for attending college". It is only to get job for earning a living, and not concerned with getting knowledge. Doyle (2008: 20) reports that high school students were not interested in the subjects they study, but in getting good grades to join universities and to get good jobs after graduating.

In another study, it was found out that "37% of students would drop out of college if they thought college was not helping their chances of getting a job" (Doyle, 2008: 21). Shi (2013: 68-69) mentions an experiment on teaching English in the universities using the constructive approach, and she found out that students who were not interested to learn Basic English course earlier showed a change of attitude to practice it using the new techniques. As motivation is a key component of learning, the EFL instructors need to work hard to motivate their learners.

The instructors were desperate that their students would not change their mind even if they tried to advise their students to shift their attitude towards English language. In a student-centered classroom, it is the student who is responsible for his/her learning, and they need strong

motivation for engaging in the given learning task. In the absence of this motivation and self-responsibility, it is easy to observe serious hindrances in the language classrooms. In connection with the reasons that students did not like student-centered approach, Doyle (2008:18-19) reports that students are not risk takers for their learning, previous schooling experience is mostly teacher-centered, students do not give more focus for learning, and they are not committed to applying extra effort.

As Cheewakaroon (2011:77) states, lack of motivation is a major problem for students in the EFL classroom. Prince and Felder (2006:5) mention that the motivation students hold towards their learning highly affects their commitment and efforts they expend in the teaching and learning process. Boersma(2008: 5) states that language teachers who use a variety of appropriate teaching methods in their classes are more likely to motivate and engage students in successful language learning than those who do not use new techniques. According to Vgotsky"s theory, students" success in language learning depends on their motivation for learning (Palmer, 2005: 1855; Yang and Wilson, 2006: 365). For example, if they plan to pass a quiz, they do not study beyond that, which is more of surface level of understanding.

The constructivist theory of learning supports the presentation of authentic learning tasks that are relevant and meaningful for students (Xamaní, 2013: 1). That means, the given tasks and activities should be related to the culture and experience of the students so that they will get motivation to attempt the learning activities. That will sustain the interest of students to work hard by themselves inside and outside the classroom.

As Kumaravadivelu (2006: 33) points out, anxiety has a negative effect on the teaching and learning process of the EFL classroom. Students are afraid of the negative comments that come from teachers, classmates, and others. The anxiety level that language learners experience in or out of classroom is likely to influence their language learning. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 34) indicates that high anxiety can hinder language acquisition. If the anxiety level is high, it affects negatively students" success in the language learning.

Currently, the Ethiopian government has introduced an initiative to the development and use of indigenous languages for schooling in the primary schools and some in the secondary schools for using them as working languages in the respective regions and zones. As a result, people nowadays

generally have got the notion that their languages are enough to operate in the society, and do not see the need to study foreign languages including English. This seems to negatively influence students who study English in the formal schooling. As a result, their progress in learning and using the language for communication is generally unsatisfactory.

□ *Irrelevance of English Language Support Courses for Productive Skills*

The participants (students) of the study dominantly commented that the type of English language course they experienced in the freshman level is not important to improve their language skills. Due to problems of content selection, teaching for the test, and instructor's approaches to teaching, the students did not see anything new at this level in contrast to the teaching of English at the lower grade levels. They also indicated that had it been in their own option, they would not have been registered for these types of courses. This view is similar to that of Shi (2013: 63) who states that EFL instruction in Chinese universities faced problems in relation to methodology and textbooks: teachers lecture, give exercises and administer tests and examinations. The textbooks were also reported to be content based and in structural approach. As a result, students were not motivated to engage in the teaching and learning process since their academic life was long and boring for many years (Shi, 2013: 63).

The instructors also supported this view and indicated that after taking the course the students show little or no progress at all in their language skills. This is a source of concern for the academic community as it seriously influences the language teaching and learning process. Similarly, Seid (2012:14) commented that the language performance of students is not satisfactory even after taking English Language support courses in the Ethiopian public universities. In connection to the idea of scaffolding in social constructivist theory of learning, instructors are advised to set challenging but achievable language learning tasks so that students could be motivated to learn (Yang and Wilson, 2006: 365).

Students are likely to engage in contents and learning experiences when the tasks and contents are authentic (real world) problems, challenging, related to their interest, culture, gender, and social life. This idea is in line with the social-constructivist learning theory, which argues that students work on tasks or activities when the tasks are interesting, meaningful, related to their background, and attainable based on their current level of understanding (Kaufman, 2004: 304).

Learning contents and tasks should not be selected from available sources on random basis by instructors merely because they catch their attention. The participants of the study mentioned this type of problem. This is not the characteristic of student-centered EFL classrooms. Students' background should be considered in the content selection.

Harmer (2001: 253) adds to this point that language teachers should consider these factors to help students use English to produce their own ideas spontaneously. For instance, when the language teachers set tasks and topics for productive skills, factors such as choosing interesting topics, creating interest in the topics, activating schemata, and varying of topics must be considered (Harmer, 2001: 253).

Due to various factors including large class size and lack of students' interest to learn English, teaching writing skills is seen as challenging and boring in the Ethiopian schools and universities (Mesert, 2012: 2). Similarly, this type of problem was observed in schools of Botswana in that students considered writing skill as boring and fearful task, and wanted to avoid it as much as possible (Adeyemi, 2008: 26). Therefore, the selection and preparation of course materials is a crucial point in the language teaching and learning process that it should be done very carefully by professionals. It should include tasks and activities that raise topics of interest for students and encourage critical thinking and exploration for self-learning. Things should be prepared in line with the nature of constructive learning theory.

□ *Dependency in Group Work*

Richards and Rodgers (2001: 196) identify three types of cooperative learning groups based on the length of time in which they stay functional. Among these study groups, "cooperative base group" is the one that lasts for a year as a stable team. In the current context of the Ethiopian universities, this type of group is called one-to-five group structures. This grouping is used not only for English language but also for other subjects that students attend. Based on the constructivist theory of learning, study group of students is considered as an important supportive social element for learning the new language. However, the students are expected to contribute anything important for their groups, and dependency is not encouraged in any way; the groups are more of cooperative type in which there is interdependence among the members. Despite its advantages, group work without proper procedure puts pressure on active students, makes less skillful

students ignored by high achievers and becomes time consuming (Seid, 2012: 39-40; Harmer, 2001: 118). As a result, these factors may hamper the effectiveness of the grouping in the language classroom. Therefore, it is essential for the instructors to reconsider these challenges when they design tasks in group work to run the teaching and learning process smoothly.

In this study, students' dependency was the other challenge that both the students and their instructors mentioned unanimously as it was hindering individual efforts of students and the sharing of responsibility in a group's task. In the formal learning groups nominated as one-to-five group structure in each classroom, only few students in each group were active in completing the given tasks and assignments, while the majority were idle enjoying their own private business. The high achiever students also complained about this burden, and preferred to engage individually in completing these tasks and assignments.

The students were expected to use cooperative learning in the language classrooms so that every member of the groups would work hard and contribute his/her own share to the given task. However, the grouping made the students not interdependent, but dependent upon few good achievers. Yet, the good achievers complained that they were not beneficiaries of the one-to-five group structures. This was because they were busy working on the given tasks with no contribution from other members and did not have free time to study individually. This didn't entertain diversity of students' learning and it was not also designed carefully so that it could reflect interdependence.

The group's interdependence nature is very important element since everybody should contribute anything necessary to complete the given task so that it is not a burden for few students (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 193). These researches further indicate that, in using cooperative learning group, positive interdependence, individual responsibility, group formation, and social skills of the students are considered essential elements (Richards, and Rodgers, 2001: 196). However, from the reflection of the participants of this study, it was possible to conclude that the interdependence and responsibility elements were not observed in the learning groups who work together.

The tasks and activities that the students work with their group members need to be designed carefully so that the learners could be benefited from their practice. The tasks should not be set

merely to make students busy or collect marks for evaluation purposes. The students perceive group work as a means instructors use to collect marks for grading purpose and as a form of help for low achievers to score good grades since students get the chance to copy answers from high achievers in completing their assignments.

Based on social-constructive theory of learning, cooperative groups are very important in EFL classrooms so that students can work with their classmates to practice their English. The groups create the social context in which students communicate with each other, creating their own English speaking classroom community. Therefore, the formation of study groups (group structures) should be done carefully by considering the benefits students derive out of the groups. In such a way, students benefit from the interdependence, taking into account the social nature of learning based on Vygotsky's theory (Kaufman, 2004: 304). Here, students are expected to be active learners in the language learning process in order to see progress.

4.1.2 EFL Instructor-related Variables

The major themes formed out of the data analysis were the following: EFL instructors' poor classroom management, the diverse influence of students' external social environments, lack of administrative support from universities, and EFL instructors' perceptions regarding active learning approaches.

□ *EFL Instructors' Poor Classroom Management*

In connection with the impact of the instructors' classroom management on the language instruction, the participants hinted the negative impact it created on the teaching and learning process. All of the students were not generally interested with the way the EFL instructors handle the language classroom. Most of the students pointed out that the instructors treated them badly, were not open for classroom discussion, and degraded them for not giving the correct answer in a question and answer session. It was also reported that many of the instructors spent their class time for other purposes and later rush to finish the course in two of the universities.

The instructors also pointed out that they did not go to class with a good morale for language teaching due to some problems in connection with the method of teaching, the textbook, the students' interest to learn, large class size, and the social context. In line with this idea, Al Jarf

(2006: 9) states that large class size in undergraduate program has negative impacts on students' achievement, attitude of instructors and students towards instruction, classroom instruction and students' assessment. Generally, large class size is a disadvantage for EFL instruction. The average class size is 60 to 70 students in Ethiopian public universities, while language educators do not favor more than 25 students in a classroom.

It is clear that in a student-centered classroom, the type of relationship is not a master and servant kind. Thus, the instructors have to respect the students' identity, their views, and contributions in the given activity. The students have mentioned a lot of personality traits that they think their EFL instructors should have in the student-centered classroom. These were encouraging, observant, motivating, supportive, patient, role model, understanding, and optimist. During the interview, students reported that these personality traits were not observed among their instructors and that they attended class with fear and distress. It should not be forgotten that every effort should be made to develop trust among the students and the instructors and make students motivated, open, confident and reflective.

Good teaching is both an art and science (Chan et al., 2011: 11). Thus, the way the language teachers behave in the classroom when interacting with the students affects the positive psychological condition of students. Brown (1994: 202-203) advises EFL teachers to think of generating classroom energy, establishing good rapport with the students, balancing the praise and criticism they forward towards their students in their classroom management so that they can create positive, stimulating and energizing environment in their classrooms. This will create conducive environment for students to engage in the learning tasks and activities.

Jamshidnejad (2011: 15) warns EFL instructors who focus on students' errors in using English, and who do not encourage them to use their English in the classroom. This is because students do not use their chance to practice their English in which there is no other alternative. Chan et al., (2011: 11) add that the following teachers' behaviors affect positively the outcome of learning: teachers' willingness to create healthy emotional environment in the classroom, teachers' praise and encouragement to release tension and teachers' acceptance, clarifying, building, and developing students' ideas. Some of the good qualities that English language teachers need to have include enthusiasm for the subject matter, intelligence, patience, and creativity,

flexibility, maturity, communication skills, having interest in continuing professional development, appreciation of different cultures, and tolerance (Camenson, 2007: 7).

Similarly, Brown (1994: 429) also adds some attributes of language teachers in connection with interest for their profession, dedication, motivation, appreciation of cultures, and so forth in the language teaching process. He further mentions a long list of characteristics that language teachers have to possess in terms of technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, interpersonal skills, and more personal qualities (Brown, 1994: 430). These attributes are seen as good qualities that attract students to work hard in a more motivated and committed manner considering the teachers as role models in the foreign language contexts.

Moreover, they need to be well informed of current teaching materials, classroom management techniques, teaching methodology, lesson planning, and students' assessment and evaluations (Camenson, 2007: 16). All of these things will help the classroom teachers to better present themselves for the students in their day-to-day interaction. When language teachers behave in the opposite of these personality traits, they create damaging effects on students' learning (Chan et al., 2011: 10). Hence, what matters is not only the knowledge and skills of language teachers but also their personality or behavior in interacting with their students in and out of the classrooms. Teachers are likely to affect the students' language learning attitude based on their personality and methods of teaching, intelligence, patience and creativity (Camenson, 2007: 7).

Generally, the classroom management style is an essential component in the teaching and learning process, which affects learning either positively or negatively. As the students are not happy with their interaction with the EFL instructors and the bad classroom behavior of students could affect the whole of the teaching and learning process, it is good to address the issue in order to improve the strained relationship with the students. This will pave the way for a better teaching and learning process.

As Harmer presents (Harmer, 2001: 126-127), behavioral problems come from families of students, previous learning experience, damage to self-esteem of learners, boring lesson activities, discomfort of students due to other factors like boredom or extreme temperature, and teachers' reaction in the classroom. Thus, it is good to reconsider these factors as potential

sources for misbehavior of students in the language classroom. According to the social-constructivist theory of learning, the methods of teaching should be shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered thereby using relevant learning tasks and making students engaged and autonomous in the instruction (Gunduz & Hursen 2015: 527). The instructors have to also focus on the lesson and should not demand too much for students to be perfect. They have to also consider students' interest in selecting course materials and learning tasks. This helps instructors to be in smooth relationship with their students.

□ *Lack of Administrative Support from Universities*

The Administration of the universities plays a supportive role in the teaching and learning process. This role is essential in introducing and implementing innovation in the teaching and learning process (Rismiati, 2012: 47). Adula (2008: 70) also states that applying pressure with support on academic staff is necessary to bring about innovation in the teaching and learning process. That is to say it is advisable to enforce and reinforce instructors at classroom levels in order to implement the skills and knowledge obtained from trainings. However, as Biggs (1996:361) mentions, the management is likely to act negatively as observed in many countries by evaluating learning in terms of per cent (numbers) or grade leaving aside the quality of learning students have achieved. This type of institutional control to evaluate learning performance is an approach of behaviorism far from the assumptions of constructivism.

During the interview, the instructors attributed some of the problems they face to the university administration. They complained that, due to the negligence of the administration, they could not discharge their professional responsibility. The problems they mentioned were related to lack of facilities, large class size, poor incentives, bad management, and lack of plan for experience sharing, and relevant capacity building programs. These findings are consistent with the research findings of Adula (2008: 70) who mentioned failures on instructors to implement skills obtained from higher diploma training in their respective classrooms.

It is essential that the administration should work hand in gloves with the academic staff to best serve the students. It is good to reconsider the distribution of resources in the classrooms, learning centers and libraries so that students work in a student-centered environment. The overcrowded classrooms are also boring for language instruction, for English Language support

courses should not be seen similarly with other content area courses, which could be covered using lecture or teacher-centered method.

The administration should work to improve the conditions of classrooms, buy more relevant reading materials, minimize the number of tests and examinations, and innovate the teaching and learning process in the English classrooms. Language researchers such as Davis (2003: 251) and Rajcoomar (2013: 10) mention large class size, time given for the course and facilities allocated as factors that affect the teaching and learning process in the EFL classroom. Similarly, Al Jarf (2006: 9) indicates that large class size at undergraduate level has negative impacts on students' achievement, attitude of instructors and students towards instruction, classroom instruction and students' assessment.

Due to this, it is difficult for the language instructors to provide timely and relevant feedback to their students. The classrooms available are not different from the traditional teacher-centered type of classroom. If these classrooms are not motivating, the students will not have positive attitude towards the teaching and learning process. The types of language classrooms in the student-centered approach are different from the traditional types of teacher-centered classrooms in terms of room size, number of students per classroom, and facilities.

According to the social constructivist theory of learning, all the necessary facilities should be supplied to the classrooms so that students could engage in the learning tasks (Yang and Wilson, 2006: 365). The classroom should be a supportive environment for the students in the teaching and learning process. Other resources in the library and English language-centre are also essential resources they can use. This shows that the traditional classroom setting should be changed to a more social setting in which students get more cooperation than competition. Therefore, the administration has to rethink the organization of the classrooms for the teaching and learning process in line with the constructivist theory of learning.

□ *EFL Instructors' Perceptions Regarding Active Learning Approaches*

It is clear that the perception people have about things affect either positively or negatively the way they think and act in the environment. In relation to language instruction, Cheewakaroon (2011: 80) points out that there is mismatch between the teachers' beliefs and

their actual classroom practices in the EF L instruction. There is a sort of inclination to exercise the commonly held view that “teachers teach the way they were taught”.

As the education culture is more of teacher-centered approach, the instructors are likely to teach their students in a way they were treated while they were students. There is a tendency to stick to their past experience of the teaching and learning process. In addition to the instructors’ reaction, as Felder and Brent (1996: 44) reported, the students may not accept and work with active learning approaches willingly. Thus, it is good to reconsider the perceptions of both groups for the successful implementation of innovative teaching techniques.

The participants of the study reported that they were in favor of active learning techniques and student-centered approaches although they mentioned it was not satisfactory in the actual classroom practice. The instructors further added that they were totally disappointed, and did not feel any sense of achievement in using active learning and student-centered approach; they did not believe that the current situation was conducive to implement active learning and student-centered approach.

This is a similar view to Cheewakaroon (2011: 80) who explains that, even if teachers claim to like to implement student-centered approach in their classrooms, they generally resort to the traditional teacher-centered EFL instruction during actual instruction. Kaufman (2004: 310) also mentions that even if teachers are aware of the advantages of constructivist theory of learning, they do not easily shift to student-centered approach to implement constructivist approaches of learning.

It is good to have general attitudinal change to practice the innovations in the teaching and learning process effectively. The actors of the instruction may engage in a mechanical way up to a point that it is minimally enough for discharging responsibility “to be in compliance with an administrative mandate.” (Alemayhu & Solomon, 2007: 113).

□ *The Adverse Influence of the External Social Environment*

Here the instructors claimed that the way the students view the teaching and learning process in general and English language learning in particular is highly influenced by the larger social or external environment of the society in which they live in.

Most of the factors mentioned were related to cost of living, social status and economic welfare. The attitudes and values the students develop are shaped by this larger context of the society. The findings of the following study are an example for this situation. A group of researchers studied the motivation for learning of 844 students in undergraduate programs in some British universities. They wanted to know why the students were cheating in the examinations to get good grade. From this study it was found out that the majority (66%) of the students related their reasons to study with getting a good job after graduation, while some other students (24%) related their study with personal development (Newstead & Hoskins, 2003: 63). This shows that the job market as part of the larger social environment affects the way students approach their learning.

According to the views of the instructors who participated in my study, nowadays the society is reflecting low opinion of education and learning excellence, while at the same time giving higher respect for money, income generation, business, and for people who run such activities. As a result, the academic community feels a sense of negligence revealed by the larger social environment. The students have also emphasized the higher social values given for money, businessmen, political affiliation, subjectivity in offices, and other short-cuts for success in life. They stressed that the hard-working people and their efforts do not make any difference if they are not wise to act according to the current norms of the society.

That is to say, many people in the society are getting other alternatives that enable them to get wealth, power and respect in a way that is not decent or deserving. They say that academic excellence is not correlated with these “success indicators” or interest areas in the larger social environment. As a result, they feel they are neglected by their social environment to get these things.

In relation to this idea, Kumaravadivelu (2006: 44) states that the background of learners, the broader social, economic, political, and educational environments all interact together and have the potential to influence the students’ language learning “in ways unintended and unexpected by policy planners, curriculum designers or textbook producers”. These environmental factors are likely to influence the teaching and learning process of English (Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 39). The Ethiopian ministry of education has also hinted the need to address these problems in its policy document which states that the problems in relation with teachers’ living conditions and

their professional needs have to be addressed (MoE, 2002: 106). Generally, both the students and their instructors have underscored the negative influence these factors have on the values the academic community develops towards teaching and learning process.

5. Conclusion

In spite of what is often reported by College of Social Sciences and Humanities, department heads and deans regarding the complete and successful implementation of active learning techniques and student-centered approaches in their institutions, no such extensive innovation was practiced in the English classrooms as part of this study. This indicates the reality that the reform of our education still lags behind the expectations of Ministry of Education policy makers and the university management.

The practices observed in the study were still dominated by the old teacher-centered approach of the behaviorist model. It is thus high time we thought the implementation of these proposed reforms for Ethiopian higher education. Indeed, the government itself is calling for the reassessment of the quality of education and measures to be taken to address these very serious challenges.

It is important here to emphasize that educational policy and its strategies must be studied intensively using empirical data regarding actual practices in the field. It is essential to reconsider the existing situation of the English language teaching in order to minimize the challenges and improve the teaching and learning process right from primary school the tertiary level.

This would be best achieved through a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders at all levels because students' previous language backgrounds affect their academic success at university level. Generally, unless these problems are solved by the concerted efforts of stakeholders, the EFL instruction will go on business as usual; does not bring the expected success among the student population.

REFERENCES

- Adeyemi, D.A. (2008). *Approaches to teaching English Composition Writing at Junior Secondary Schools in Botswana*: PhD Thesis. University of South Africa.
- Adula, B. (2008). „Application of higher diploma training program skill in classroom instruction:

- The case of education faculty, Jimma university, Ethiopia", *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Science*, 4(1): 51-72.
- Al Jarf, R. (2006). „Large student enrollments in EFL programs: Challenges and consequences", *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 8(4): 8-34.
- Alemayhu, B. and Solomon, M. (2007). „Instructors' stages of concern and Levels of Use of active learning Strategies: The case of HDP programs of three higher learning Institutes in Amhara Region", *The Ethiopian Journal of Higher Education*, 4(2): 103-135.
- Beniss, R.S. and Bazzaz, V.E. (2014). „The impact of pushed output on accuracy and fluency of Iranian EFL learners' speaking", *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research* 2(2), pp.51-72. <http://www.urmia.ac.ir/ijltr>
- Behabadi, F. and Behfrouz, B. (2013). „The Relationship between Characteristics of Good Language Learners and the Especially Employed Learning Strategies during Educational Context" *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 14 (3), 78_90.
- Biggs, J. (1996). „Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment", *Journal of Higher Education*, 32, pp.347-364.
- Boersma, E.J. (2008). *Ethiopian instructors experience with accommodating EFL students' learning styles at Bahir Dar University*, PhD Dissertation, Oklahoma State University, Ann Arbor, OK.
- Brown, H.D. (1994). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Longman.
- Brutt-Griffler, J. (2009). „The political perspective". In: Kapp, K. and Seidlhofer, B. eds. *Handbook of Foreign Language Communication and Learning*. Volume 6. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Camenson, B. (2007). *Opportunities in teaching English to Speakers of other Languages*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Chan, W.M., Chin, K.N. & Suthiwan, T. (2011). „Foreign language teaching in Asia and beyond : introduction to the book". In: Chan, W.M., Chin, K.N. & Suthiwan, T. eds. *Foreign Language Teaching in Asia and Beyond : Current Perspectives and Future Directions*. Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter.
- Cheewakaron, R. (2011). *Teaching change in response to Thai tertiary English language*

- teaching reform*. PhD Thesis. University of Wollongong, Thailand.
- Davis, M. 2003. „Barriers to reflective practice: the changing nature of higher education“, *Journal of Active Learning in Higher Education*, 4(3): 243–255.
- Doyle, T. 2008. *Helping Students learn in a Learner-Centered Environment: Guide to facilitating Learning in Higher Education*. Sterling: Stylus Publishing.
- Dueraman, B. 2012. „Teaching EFL writing: understanding and re-thinking the Thai experience“, *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 4(1): 255-275.
- Felder, R.M. and Brent, R. 1996. „Navigating the Bumpy Road to Student-Centered Instruction“, *College Teaching*, 44(2): 43-47.
- Getnet, T. 2016. „Quality of education in the Ethiopian Higher Institutions“, Addis Zemen. 18 April. 13a.
- Gunduz, N. and Hursen, C. 2015. „Constructivism in teaching and learning; content analysis evaluation“, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191: 526-533.
- Grabin, L.A. 2007. *Alternative assessment in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Israel*. D.Ed. Thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Grabe, W. and Soller, F.L. 2009. „Teaching the written foreign language“. In: Knapp, K. and Seidlhofer, B. eds. *Handbook of Foreign Language Communication and Learning*. Volume 6. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Harmer, J. 2001. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. 3rd ed. Cambridge. Jamshidnejad, A. 2011. „An innovative approach to understanding oral problems in foreign language learning and communication“, *Journal of Academic and Applied Studies*, 1(1): 3-21.
- Kaufman, D. 2004. „Constructivist issues in language learning and teaching“, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24: 303-319.
- Kahsay, M.N. 2012. *Quality and quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: critical issues and practical implications*. PhD dissertation. University of Twente, The Netherlands.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. 2006. *Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Post method*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Meseret, T.R. 2012. *Instructors' and students' perceptions and practices of task-based writing in an EFL context*. PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

- Ministry of Education (MoE). 2002. *The Education and Training policy and its Implementation*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). 2007. „A new draft curriculum for the undergraduate program“. In: *Proceedings of the National Curriculum Change Workshop* held at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 10-17, 2007.
- Newstead, S. and Hoskins, S. 2003. „Encouraging Student Motivation“. In: Fry, H., Ketteridge, S. & Marshall, S. eds. *A Handbook for Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*. 2nd ed. London: Kogan Page.
- Palmer, D. 2005. „A motivational view of constructivist informed teaching“, *International Journal of Science Education*, 27(15): 1853-1881.
- Prince, M.J. and Felder, R.M. 2006. „Inductive teaching and learning methods: definitions, comparisons, and research bases“, *Journal of Engineering Education*, 95(2): 123-138.
- Pundak, D. and Rozner, S. 2008. „Empowering engineering college staff to adopt active learning methods“, *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 17(2). pp.152-16.
- Rajcoomar, R. 2013. *Strategies for promoting active learning in large underfunded physics classrooms in Kerala, India*. MA dissertation. University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Richards, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. 2001. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Ridenour, C.S. and Newman, I. 2008. *Mixed Methods Research: Exploring the Interactive Continuum*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rismiati, C. 2012. *Teachers' Concerns Regarding the implementation of integrated thematic instruction: a study of primary grade teachers in Kanisius catholic schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia*, PhD Thesis. Loyola University, Chicago.
- Saville-Troike, M. 2006. *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. New York, NY: CUP.
- Seid, M. 2012. *Effects of cooperative learning on reading comprehension achievement in EFL and social skills of Grade 10 students*. PhD Thesis. Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa.
- Serbessa, D.D. 2006. „Tension between traditional and modern teaching- learning approaches in Ethiopian primary schools“, *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*,

- 9(1):123-140. Shi, J .2013. „The application of constructivism: activities for enlivening comprehensive English class“, *English Language Teaching*, 6(2).
- Tesera, B., S humet, A. &Demeke, W. 2010. „The major factors that affect academic achievement of DMU students: (a mechanism to balance academic quality and uantity)“. In: Addisu, M. and Molla, Y. eds. *Proceedings of the First National Research Symposium on Sustainable Development: A Great Concern in Africa, DM*, February 13, 2010. DMU. pp. 25-58.
- Walters, D. 2007. „Who do they think they are? Students“ perceptions of themselves as Learners“. In: Campbell, A. and Norton, L. eds. *Learning, Teaching and Assessing in Higher Education: Developing Reflective Practice*. Learning Matters, p.56-67.
- Xamaní, I.M. 2013. „Practical implications of a constructivist approach to EFL teaching in a higher education context“, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 10(2): 1-18.
- Yang, L. and Wilson, K. 2006. 'Second language classroom reading: a social constructivist approach', *The Reading Matrix*, 6(3): 364-372.
- Yule, G. 1996. *The Study of Language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.