Current Issues of English Language Teaching in Ethiopia

A system Loop -Evaluation of the current English Language Teaching in Ethiopia

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- **Introduction**

Individuals have a natural tendency to focus on their actions when they encounter a problem and try to give short term solution to the problem. This ignores the underlining causes of the problem and the experience that individuals gain from this process can be described as **single-loop learning**. On the other hand, when individuals go more deeply into the cause of the problem to detect errors and reexamine rules and procedures the learning process is termed as **double-loop learning**. Organizations and systems also follow this similar pattern of learning as far as they learn through the collective experiences and actions of individuals in them.

In the following sections of this paper, I have presented my arguments to show that the English language education policy and the teaching practices in Ethiopian secondary schools and higher education institutions are characterized by single loop model of action. The Single and double-loop models of action proposed by Argyris and Schön (1978) are briefly presented in the first section and a discussion of my evaluation follows in the next sections.

- **Model I Theory of Action**

Argyris (2001, 2004) argues that people have espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are the stated values and beliefs. Theories-in-use are the actual behavior of individuals. Argyris (2001, 2004) found that most people have a Model I theory-in-use. Model I is when organizations are governed by four values: (1) achieve intended purpose; (2) maximize winning and minimize losing; (3) suppress negative feeling; and (4) behave according to what one believes is rational. These governing values lead to the following behavioral strategies: (1) control environment and tasks unilaterally; and (2) protect self and others unilaterally by: (a) advocating personal position; (b) evaluating the thoughts and actions of others and yourself; and (c) attributing causes to whatever you are trying to understand. The consequences of these prevalent behavioral strategies are: (1) miscommunication; (2) self-fulfilling prophecies; (3) self-sealing processes; and (4) escalating errors through single-loop learning.

- **Model II Theory of Action**

Argyris (2001, 2004) says that, for many people, the espoused theory contradicts the theory-in-use. However, if they wish their espoused theory to match with their actual theory-in-use, the governing values must change and they must consciously switch to Model II theory-in-use. In this case, the governing values are: (1) valid information; (2) free and informed choice; and (3) internal commitment and responsibility to monitor one's effectiveness. The key behavioral strategies are: (1) sharing control; (2) attribution and evaluation illustrated with relatively directly observable data; (3) surfacing conflicting view; and (4) encouraging public testing of evaluations of ideas. The consequences of such behavioral strategies are: (1) reduction of self-serving, (2) self-sealing and (3) error-escalating processes through double-loop learning (Argyris, 2001).

Model I theory-in-use produces single-loop learning. Single-loop learning puts emphasis on routine and incremental improvement (Fulmer and Keys, 2004, p. 25). Whether this is a good policy or not is never discussed. Double-loop learning requires people to ask questions about the reasons and motives behind the policy (Argyris, 1994). The ultimate aim of double-loop learning is to publically understand and discuss the shared mental model of the group (Senge, 1990). Single-loop learning is useful for routine tasks and it has a place in business. It is counterproductive for non-routine and complex tasks. Double-loop learning is essential for transformational change (Argyris, 2004). The following diagram after Argyris and Schön (1978) illustrates Model I and Model II theories of action and the resultant learning processes.
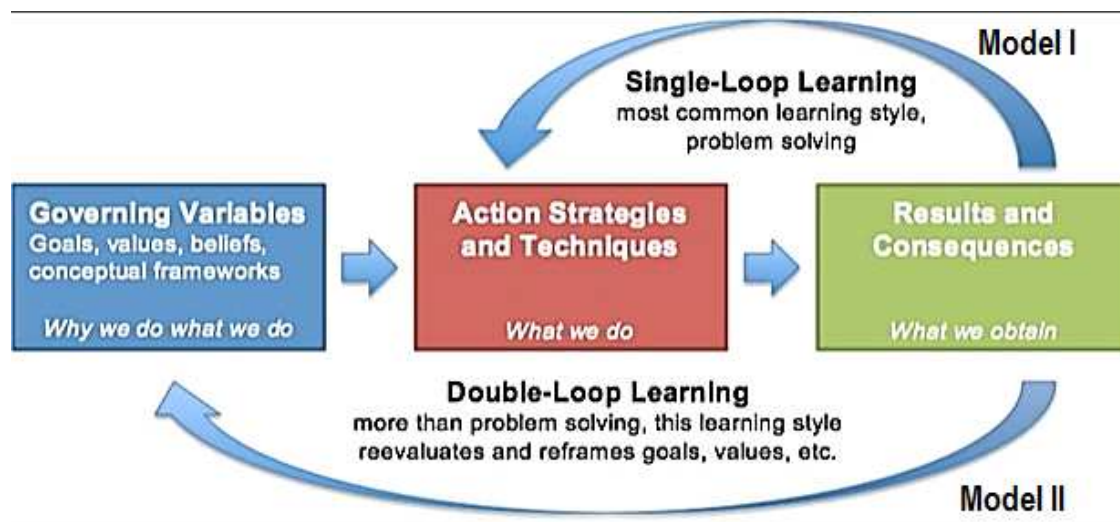
Figure 1: *Single- and double-loop learning*

- **Policy Indications for ELT in Ethiopia**

The new education and training policy of Ethiopia formally gave English a status of independent subject starting from grade one, and as a medium for all subjects from lower secondary schools (grade 9) to higher institutions although different regions have adopted different regional policies and attitudes towards English in their education system (Heugh et al, 2006). Apart from its educational roles, English has also a role as an official language in private and public organizations, a medium of diplomatic relations, commerce, trade and truism etc. However, the role of English language has been defined in the Ethiopian Educational and Training Policy document (1994; p. 37-38) only in the context of education: the teaching of English as a subject in schools, the use of English as a medium of instruction (Amlaku, 2010). Otherwise, the document does not contain any statement about the role and application of the language in other sectors.

- **The Curriculum Framework as a Source of Governing Variables**

The curriculum is the top governing variable for all individuals working under the English language programs at any level. It incorporates other important variables in it. The vision, mission and values of English language programs, the goals of teaching and learning English language, the teaching and assessment methods, and other action strategies and techniques have all been stated there. School communities are also guided by other governing variables such as school rules, professional roles, operating standards and professional responsibilities.

- **ELT Practices in Ethiopia**

English language teaching practice in Ethiopia is characterized by strict adherence to the curriculum. Teachers and students follow the curriculum and if they need additional resources for their class that would be a departure from a curriculum. The Standards for the English

Language Teachers (K-12) (MoE, 2013) on the other hand, provides that English language teachers in Ethiopian schools should have professional English Language Skills and content knowledge. It also states that teachers should have the ability to modify or adapt ill-designed language activities/tasks in the English textbooks they teach. In fact, this contradicts with what is happening on the ground. Teachers can of course comment on the curriculum, but they cannot have the power to modify curriculum contents. English language teachers in public schools are subjected to strict control when it comes to implementing the curriculum. On the other hand, teachers in private schools have some degree of freedom in using an alternative school curriculum (Tonkyn, 2017). Even though they can use their own curriculum, they are obliged to use the state curriculum for planning.

Teachers also have several negative feelings about the English language education in the Ethiopian context. Their voices are not often heard. For instance, they complain about the practical problems of applying certain teaching methods such as communicative language teaching, student-centered teaching, active learning methods and continuous assessment. For example, the teaching approach permitted by the curriculum is communicative language teaching (CLT). A number of local studies indicate that the method requires taking important considerations to be applicable in Ethiopian schools and universities (Habtamu, 2011; Ebissa, 2014; Ebissa and Bhavani, 2017). Habtamu (2011) states that CLT is not suitable to the context of Ethiopia where facilities and classroom resources are poorly structured. The participants (teachers and students) have low level of English language proficiency and the approach requires making effective interaction in the language. In addition, teachers and students have misconceptions about CLT. Due to such difficulties, there is a resistance from teachers and students to apply communicative activities in the classroom. Ebissa and Bhavani (2017) also indicate the challenges of implementing CLT in Ethiopia. They argue that the problem emerges from a mismatch between practice and policy. The finding from their study indicates that CLT is incompatible with the existing examination system and the existing syllabus is not suitable with CLT approach. Classroom facilities are also lacking to aid CLT practices and the sizes of classes in most schools are large. Consequently, students' communicative competence has never improved.

Double-loop learning requires people to ask questions about the reasons and motives behind the policy (Argyris, 1994). Therefore, an education system that suppresses teachers' feelings and complaints or that does not take the underlying causes of the problems into a reexamination and yet aims to achieve goals is a single loop system. May be the recently introduced "Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap", if approached from a double loop model of cation, will come up with a long term solution to the problem.

The curriculum in use has demanded a greater focus on learner-centered teaching with the use of active learning methods. But classroom realities are far from what the curriculum proposes (Tonkyn, 2017). Tonkyn pleads curriculum leaders to pave the way by understanding how to actually apply new theories and focuses in the classroom. Existing studies show that most

classrooms are teacher dominated. The primary barriers of implementing active learning techniques in EFL classrooms, according to Kitaw (2017), are: students' poor background exposure to the English language; students' negative associations with language learning; EFL instructors' ineffective classroom management; the adverse influence of students' external social environments; dependency in group work; low relevance of English Language support courses and lack of administrative support from universities.

Part of the action strategies in the English language teaching is the practice of continuous assessment. Even though the curriculum specifies that a greater proportion of the assessment in the subject should be covered by continuous assessment, the practice in many schools and universities is not adequate. Abiy (2013), for instance, observed that high school English teachers do not properly practice continuous assessment.

- **Action research and professional development**

Teachers' reflective practices through action research and professional development efforts are arguably one of the areas that reflect a single loop model of learning under ELT programs in Ethiopia. Practitioners engaged in single-loop learning emphasize the importance of methods and techniques and struggle to ensure their efficiency (Jeylan, 2006, p. 17). This is true in the context of Ethiopia where teachers force themselves to apply language teaching methods and assessment techniques with little success.

Though reflective practices are presumably the professional responsibilities of teachers at all levels, it is not fair to be judgmental about teachers' reluctance to engage in action research and professional development activities. Several local studies (Firdissa, 2007, 2015; Eba, 2013; Belilew and Hailemariam, 2017) largely point out that English language teachers have some awareness about the importance of action research for their professional practice and professional growth, but they do not practice them due to a number of internal and external hindering factors. Based on the findings of the aforementioned studies English language instructors' lack of motivation; time constraint; paucity of research fund, facilities and materials; dissatisfaction in their job; knowledge gaps and skills in doing action research; misconceptions about CPD; large class size and work load are the major obstacles for action research and continuous professional development practices in Ethiopia.

The current atmosphere in educational institutions presents only a single loop learning opportunity for reflective action research and professional development. This situation can be transformed into a double loop learning platform if schools and universities are able to create a permissive and supportive environment by designing different sustainable professional development strategies that enhance the language teachers' professional, content and pedagogic knowledge. In this respect, Jeylan (2006) advises teacher educators that instead of holding complaints about teachers' low level of reflective practice, it is better to design a system that can help them to unlock their reflective potential.

A model of the action research cycles we commonly known in the existing literature is a model depicting a single loop model. What can be truly described as a double loop-learning model of action research reflective cycle has been constructed by Brooke (2017). He took the elements of the model from three authors: Daloglu (2002), Valli (1993) and Walker, et.al, (2004). Daloglu (2002) presented a simple but effective framework of questions to facilitate action research projects. The questions can guide a practitioner through the single learning loop of the model. These are:

- What do I already know but benefited from observing/ teaching?
- What did I not know but learnt from my observations/ teaching?
- What would I like to implement in my own teaching?
- What are my comments on and reactions to the experiences I have had?

Brooke took the second element from Valli's (1993) deliberative reflection. Deliberative reflection is an act of using knowledge from the literature in the field to inform practice. This concept can inform the responses to Daloglu's (2002) questions. The final element is from Walker, et.al, (2004) meaningful dialogue within a text.
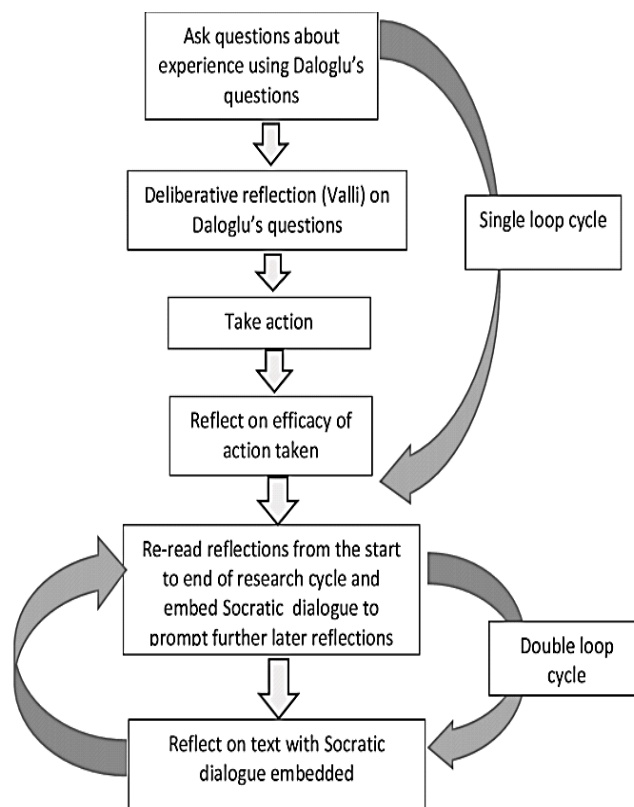

Figure 2: Facilitating the action-reflective cycle to engage in deep learning

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