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**Some Observations about the effectiveness of the research methodology
component of the graduate education in TEFL**

by

Nuru Mohammed-Tahir (PhD)

Abstract

This paper is based on an earlier stage of a research project intended to assess the performance of students in research methodology with a view to cataloguing successes and failures in the research component of the training offered to students as part of their graduate education. More specifically, drawing on a subset of data gathered for the main study, the paper reports some preliminary results of an exploratory study aimed at assessing the adequacy and effectiveness the research component of the curriculum for the MA programme in TEFL which is run by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of AAU. In exploring the relative success of this component of the training, this particular piece of research has confined itself to a measure of student performance in the design and development of instruments for data collection. Data for this paper were obtained from the research-related work produced by students at three distinct phases in the training process: the proposal writing, the thesis writing and the oral defence stages. The overwhelming finding of this research is that students' output appeared to suffer from many flaws in design and logic. The results also suggest that students are unable to demonstrate the knowledge and skills deemed necessary for the effective use of data collection tools for research purposes. More importantly, there appeared to be gaps in their ability to apply research skills ranging from seemingly mundane but absolutely crucial ones to the more advanced ones.

Introduction

This section presents an overview of the context and is intended to provide a backdrop against which the worth and aim of the paper is to be understood. It covers four levels of context. It begins by making some observations about the bigger picture, which in the context of this paper refers to policy environment and performance of the education sector. It then moves on to the second level where it briefly discusses the missions of higher education as well as the status of research in the context of higher education in the country. Continuing with the pattern of progressive narrowing of the definition of context, it then provides a brief discussion of the role of AAU in

supporting efforts in the sector. Finally, it provides a brief account of a specific academic programme, namely the MA programme in TEFL run by DFLL, which also constitutes the actual setting for the present study.

The education sector

One prominent feature of education in Ethiopia concerns the fact that over the last years there has been a dramatic growth in the sector in terms of the creation of institutions of learning and level of participation. This is partly attributable to the increasing demand for education and partly to a policy framework informed by the fundamental belief that education offers a key tool in development endeavors. In fact, there is a stronger commitment on the part of the government than ever before to ensure increased access to education, and it is not hard to imagine that the primary drive for the huge investment in this sector has a lot to do with the conviction that education represents a critical variable in the fight against poverty. Needless to say, this has resulted in the rapid expansion of education at almost all levels. Higher education is not an exception; this sub-sector is also characterised by a similar progressive expansion. For instance, the number of public universities in Ethiopia now stands at 21. This is in stark contrast to what used to be the case a couple of decades ago where there was a very low base of higher education in the country. The policy framework also encourages the creation and expansion of PIHE (Private Institutions of Higher Education) to help achieve the country's development goals. The expansion of higher education has inevitably led to a corresponding increase in enrolment in colleges and universities.

In response to the greater participation and increased access to tertiary education, there has been an ever increasing demand for academic staff. For instance, the figure rose from 1835 (1718 Ethiopians and 117 Expatriate) in 1995/96 to 4848 (4293 Ethiopians

and 555 expatriate) in 2004/05. A similar pattern of dramatic increase in the number of academic staff characterises PIHE (Private Institutions of Higher Education). For instance, in 2001/2, there were 267 teachers in PIHE, of whom only 16 were females. The figure jumped to 437 (29 F) in 2001/02. The pattern of growing demand continues to be a notable feature of higher education in the country (Ministry of Education 2003).

Research as a core mission of higher education

There is a widely held belief which considers a close association between teaching and research as a defining characteristic of 'universities' (Bridges 2009). Research is, therefore, internationally seen as one of the core missions of universities. The time-honoured high status accorded to research is reflected in the thinking that considers research as a basis for determining the vitality and scholarship (productivity) of universities and faculty. This is evident in the traditional admonition 'Publish or Perish' which continues to be a potent policy internationally. Further, promotion policies of universities (See AAU Senate Legislation, 2007, for example) recognise research output as a major requirement for promotion to the next academic rank. The establishment of research centres and the inclusion of the research wing in the administrative structures of universities is a further reflection of the prestigious status of research. In addition to the widely held thinking that seeks to maintain a link between teaching and research, the demand for universities to actively engage in research is based on the social and economic returns of education and the recognition of research as a key component of development. There is a growing understanding among policy makers that research has a great role to play in development endeavors in terms of providing scientific solutions to problems and generating new knowledge and insight that can be used in planning and improving practice.

Like most universities around the globe, the universities in Ethiopia including those that are newly established and those that evolved into a university from a non-university status are required to accomplish three missions: teaching, research and community service (outreach), all of which are considered instrumental in bringing about an all-round development in the country (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003). Universities are, therefore, expected to supply adequately trained workforce needed for economic development. However, there is some literature to suggest that the performance of universities in the areas of teaching and research falls short of the expectation of the government. For instance, the quality and process of teaching has been criticised for being below the desired level (Daniel Desta, 2004). The performance of universities in research has also been shown to have fallen short of the expectations of stakeholders on several measures including quality and relevance. Similarly, the research undertakings of universities in the country have been criticised for being less relevant to the immediate needs of the country (Teshome Yizengaw, 2004; Derebssa Dufera, 2004). What is more, there is some evidence to suggest that the quality of the training offered and the competence of those who graduate from the universities may fail to satisfy different stakeholders. For instance, the performance of graduate students in research skills has been a cause for concern for some time now (Amare Asgedom 2007).

While universities are struggling to meet the demands of the government that relate to teaching and outreach, it is not hard to imagine that delivering the third mandate that relates to research will probably remain a daunting task for most of them. The potential factors that might account for the unsatisfactory performance of universities in research include lack of research culture in the country, absence of active research tradition within universities, and lack of resources. Bridges (2009) observed:

Not surprisingly, given the recency and pace of this great expansion [higher education], the serious lack of resources to invest in it, the shortage of adequately qualified staff to populate the new universities of those that do, meeting the ambitious aspirations that the universities have set for themselves-primarily in relation to research-is not and will not be easy. Many of the new universities, even where they have their roots in previous higher education institutions have little or no research experience to draw on, inadequate libraries and internet access and other infrastructure, and no tangible 'research culture'. (p.13).

While lack of research culture in the country may be a barrier universal to all universities in the country, it is also obvious that their performance in the area of research is likely to vary across universities depending on the situation in which they operate. With regard to the new universities, acute shortage of qualified academic personnel, inadequacy of the infrastructure that research calls for and the low research base from which they have to start represent a few of the enormous challenges facing higher education in the country. In response to this, a number of recommendations for addressing the human capacity and resource needs of Ethiopian new public universities have been put forward (See Ashcroft 2004, for example). Not surprisingly, recent strategies designed to address the human capacity needs puts some universities at the centre of the reform of higher education in the country. Understandably, one of these institutions is the Addis Ababa University, a learning and research centre, which has always remained a strong influence on the education sector in the country.

The historic and unique role of AAU

AAU as the oldest and grand university in the country has for a long time been a major source of trained manpower. The intellectual, technical and administrative workforce in the country is one way or another the product of this university (Teshome, 2009). Let's not forget that this goes for both public and private institutions of education. The

university continues to offer a viable strategic option in efforts aimed at addressing issues of capacity building and quality. Recently, the university has been made to assume a unique role in the country's tertiary education. There is now a more urgent need for the university to support efforts at expanding higher education by producing faculty for the emerging universities. This unique mission and policy framework offers a huge opportunity for the university. For instance, it has led not only to the unprecedented expansion and diversification of graduate programmes but also to an unparalleled dramatic increase in enrolment. Another unique opportunity concerns the prospect of AAU evolving in a fundamental way into a graduate and research university.

However, let it also be recognised that the renewed mission also poses a huge challenge for the university. One enormous challenge for the AAU relates to its obligation to live up to the expectations of the government and other stake holders in terms of supplying institutions with adequately trained faculty through its graduate education. The ever increasing participation of students at this level also implies that the university has to learn to cope with less elitist recruitment procedures and prove its capability to successfully accommodate candidates with differing academic ability. The relatively easier access to graduate education also demands that the university adopt a more realistic expectation about the potential of the mass of students who join it. In other words, it has to make sure that it designs and provides training programmes capable of producing qualified faculty out of students with diverse background and levels of ability. This will require, among other things, taking stock of its efforts so far with a view to determining the suitability as well as the relative success of its programmes. It is with this in mind that the paper set out to explore the effectiveness

of one graduate programme offered at AAU, namely, the MA programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

The MA Programme in TEFL

This programme which was born about three decades ago and later revised around a decade ago is intended to produce well-trained teachers of English for high schools and IHE. It is a two-year training programme made up of four semesters, with the last semester devoted to the writing of thesis. Major programme components include language teaching methodology and research methods; there is little or no dose of subject matter in it. The training in research skills reflects the long standing tradition that considers research education as an ingredient of graduate training. Potential sources of input for students include a course in research methods which is worth 3 credits and which runs during the first semester of Year One. This is followed by a course entitled Graduate Seminar, a 2-credit course running in the second semester of the same year. The Graduate Seminar is intended to provide students with opportunities for practising presentation skills based on published and unpublished research reports. The students are also expected to enrich their knowledge and skill in research design through their exposure to and/or participation in non-course environments such as presentations and seminars by peers and senior students as well as MA and Ph. D thesis oral defence sessions. As a culmination of their entire training, they are expected to submit a research proposal and write a thesis during their second year of the training. Apparently, the reason for requiring them to produce a thesis is mainly to provide a more practical training in research skills as opposed to solving existing problems or making significant contribution to knowledge. A thesis has to be positively evaluated by a board made up of an advisor and another examiner. It represents a major requirement for graduation.

It is against this background, then, that I wish to pose a question concerning the adequacy of the performance and training of students in research design.

The focus and purpose of this paper

As indicated above, one of the things that those who join the teaching force in the emerging universities are expected to do is to undertake research in their areas of specialisation. But, what do graduates from AAU take to the universities in the country in terms of the skills and attitudes associated with effective research? Or better, how adequate is the training in research skills they receive, and how well-prepared are they to meet the demands made by their career as university teachers?

In this paper, I wish to argue that the training they receive has not succeeded in preparing graduates for college teaching in terms of the demands for research: I want to address the issue based on my personal experience as a thesis supervisor and examiner as well as evidence from the output of a student whom I consider to be a typical example of a certain cohort. Incidentally, it should be noted that the data I have used for this particular paper represents just a subset of a larger pool of data generated for an-going research project aimed at exploring the nature and effectiveness of the training in research methodology offered to students as part of their regular graduate study.

While research on students' performance in research skills requires data drawn from their work in different contexts and at different stages in the training process, the following three phases were considered in the collection of data for this paper

- First draft of a chapter on Methodology;
- Theses submitted for defence/oral exam ;
- Theses approved and submitted after oral examination.

This paper is also based on a sample of 11 theses/work in which I recently participated as a supervisor and examiner.

Observations about students' performance in research

The overall impression one gets from the analysis of students' work is that their performance suffered from a huge gap in the practical skills needed in planning and executing a research project. In what follows, I present four kinds of evidence to support the argument that students remain unprepared to undertake research expected of them after completing their graduate education.

Misuse and abuse of tools as evidence of inadequate training

The misuse and abuse of devices for data collection represents one area of difficulty in which errors and pitfalls are more frequent. While statements about the need for a multiple data collection devices is a common place in students' theses, the students generally fail to include not only the rationale behind the choice of tools but also an adequate description of how these tools are to be used. Furthermore, there is little effort made by students to match data collection devices with research questions and show the relative importance and role of each tool in the context of their study. Wherever a multiple of tools are used, there is no information about the temporal relationship of the way different tools are used. Their work also contains little evidence of genuine understanding of the purpose and assumptions underlying the use of specific tools. For instance, it is very common for students to decide to use a questionnaire regardless of the nature of the study planned. A further evidence of the superficiality of their knowledge concerns their tendency to use the questionnaire with very few respondents. One could argue that the decision to use the tool with a very tiny sample is suggestive of their lack of knowledge of the logic and the assumptions underpinning different kinds of tools and research.

Domination of theoretical knowledge as evidence of inadequate training

Given the distinction made by scholars (e.g. McLellan, 2009) between two forms of knowledge, namely "codified knowledge" (which, among other things, involves understanding what experts in a field have written or published), and "practical knowledge" (which refers to the development of expertise and relates to *learning how to do* as opposed to *making sense and meaning*), another major observation is that the training students undergo appeared to have been dominated by codified knowledge. A common observation is that, despite attempts to display their familiarity with the advantages and limitations of tools as discussed in the literature on research, they often fail to translate such understanding into action. For instance, while they may remember to acknowledge and emphasize the value of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to inquiry because neither the former nor the latter alone can provide answers to the many questions we have in language education, what ultimately transpires in their research report is the domination or exclusive use of quantitative data. In fact, it is not unusual to see such instances of *easier said than done* in the theses they produce. For instance, although they are usually quick to state that they wish to use mixed research methods not only because this approach is more likely to yield rich and reliable data but also because such complementary use of methods helps to address the inherent limitations of any given method through the strengths of the other, this is not generally borne out in their work as they often end up making very little use of some methods identified in their work.

Overdependence on the questionnaire as evidence of gaps in research skills

The faulty use and abuse of the questionnaire may also represent some evidence of gaps in research skills. Where decisions to use multiple methods are made, there is a tendency for students to overuse and/or over-depend on data obtained through questionnaire sometimes to the exclusion of data gathered by other means. In fact,

they generally tend to consider the questionnaire as a versatile tool capable of generating almost all sorts of data, or answering almost all kinds of research questions and hypotheses. Their work would seem to suggest that they are more likely to use questionnaire than other tools regardless of the nature and purpose of their study.

Persistence of problems as evidence of inadequacy and un-preparedness

Although there exists an arrangement and mechanism for students to get feedback on their thesis work at various stages of their project including the initial phases where they have to identify a problem and produce an acceptable proposal, it is often not easy for many students to make good use of suggestions for improvement offered by their instructors. That is to say, there is a tendency for students to fail to respond appropriately to constructive comments offered to them in the form of feedback. Supervisors are often heard complaining about their advisees' failure to incorporate suggestions for improvement, and they generally seem to think that this behaviour is attributable to students' inability to make sense of the ideas proposed. This is also evident in the little use they make of the feedback and recommendations made by examiners of their respective theses. It is often the case that students resubmit the same work with very little change made to it. This is perhaps because they do not possess the requisite knowledge and skill that the revision calls for and, are, therefore, bound to fail to attend to the points and concerns raised by the supervisor or examiner. The similarity of pitfalls observed in draft and final copies provides a further evidence of the persistence of difficulties arising from gaps in relevant knowledge, skill and attitude involved in the craft of conducting research.

At this stage, it would be in order to illustrate the limitations and sources of errors identified above.

Specimen: Some illustrative material

In an attempt to support my claims and observations, I will make extensive use of some material drawn from a specimen of a portion of a thesis. The case is selected because of its typicality and suitability as an illustrative material in terms of containing a greater variety of areas of difficulty spotted in the analysis of students' work. The box below provides some background information about the specimen.

Box 1:

- **Aim:** to examine the impact of national examinations in English on classroom teaching and learning through plasma TV.
- **Tools:**
 - Interview schedule for use with experts from National Examination Agency
 - Interview schedule for use with experts from ICDR
 - Observation checklist (13 items)
 - Student Questionnaire (51 items)
 - Teacher Questionnaire (17 items)
- **Setting:** Preparatory secondary school

Arbitrary choice and use of tools

In a project that aimed at examining the impact of the English component of the national examination on classroom teaching and learning through plasma (See Box 1 above), a student decided to use several tools for gathering data on the issue. These included interview, observation, and questionnaire. However, a closer examination of the way these devices were used revealed the following: First, the student-researcher did not seem to have been clear about the information needs of the study. While one would naturally expect the student to carry out some sort of content analysis of the material used in national exams as well as in classroom instruction in order to generate

data on the relationship between the two sets of educational materials, there was no attempt made by the student along this line. It is possible that the student chose to rely on data obtained through other means probably because this offered an easier option. If it was a deliberate choice, such a conscious decision offers an example of deliberate abuse or misuse of tools. Obviously, such a decision is counterproductive and represents lack of attitude considered conducive for inquiry. An alternative explanation would be to regard it as evidence of omission arising from lack of knowledge and skill needed for effective planning and design of a study. In this case, the pitfall represents failure to match objectives and/or research questions with data specific gathering tools that are capable of generating the desired kind of data. Second, the reader is provided with no information about whether the observation preceded the administration of questionnaire, or in what order and at what stage in the study each method of data collection was used. Furthermore, in the specimen work, one would find neither a discussion of the role and the relative importance or status of each tool in the context of that particular study, nor any evidence of an attempt to justify choice of tools.

Failure to identify the right source

In an effort to gather data on the wash back effect of national examinations, the student wrongly believed it was possible to obtain some useful data from experts working for a government agency responsible for the preparation of the nationwide exam. One wonders how data from such group could help in addressing the issue of impact of national examination on what goes on in the classroom. Although the group may provide a good source of data for a study intended to assess the basic considerations in the process of writing public exams, it would be wrong to expect this group to provide the data needed for a study that is based on the assumption that

examinations are capable of influencing what the teacher and the students do in the classroom, and not the other way round.

Faulty use of questionnaire

The student researcher developed two sets of questionnaire to be used with students and teachers drawn from six schools offering preparatory education. However, the way the questionnaire was used provides evidence to suggest that the student lacked a firm knowledge of the principles and the logic of using a questionnaire to collect data. The first thing to say concerns the inappropriate use of questionnaire. The decision to use a questionnaire to gather data from 12 teachers is suggestive of the student's lack of understanding of the fundamental assumption underlying the use of the tool in surveys. The use of this device to obtain data from such a small sample is probably hard to justify.

Poor performance in asking questions

The other set of evidence of gaps in knowledge and skills concerns failure of students to demonstrate a good mastery of some basic or even mundane skills. One such problem relates to failure to ask well thought out and relevant questions in questionnaires and interviews. A number of pitfalls were observed in the construction and organisation of questionnaire items. The following box identifies some of the pitfalls observed in writing questionnaire items.

Box 2: Examples of pitfalls in writing a questionnaire

- a. Asking for information that is easily available elsewhere.
- b. Including too many items, some of which were totally irrelevant.
- c. Writing items which serve little purpose in the context of a given study.
- d. Using a range of defective items including loaded, leading or multifaceted ones.
- e. Providing response choices that are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, or that are not balanced in terms of accommodating the same range of positive and negative ratings on a given scale.
- f. Problems related to organisation and format (Failure to arrange items and alternatives in a logical order)

One problem in the area of questionnaire construction concerns their tendency to ask irrelevant questions in the questionnaire in the sense of asking for information that is easily available elsewhere. A good example from the specimen may be the item that asked students the number of English lessons they have per week. Another example of a thoughtless question is the following:

<p>Q: Do you think the EHEEC English Examination samples the four language skills and language components (grammar, vocabulary etc.) practised in the preparatory learning materials proportionally?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
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While it is clear that the above item is defective on many counts, there is hardly enough space to discuss them all. Suffice it to mention that this item illustrates the lack of skill and care needed in questionnaire construction. It is pointless to ask students and teachers the scope and coverage of the exam when one could easily find out for himself by simply glancing through previously used exam papers. What is most striking is the student researcher's decision to pretend total ignorance of the nature and content of national examinations in the country. The researcher appears to be 'playing a person from Mars' when he asks students and teachers whether the national exams cover speaking, writing and listening skills. What is more, the fact that the researcher himself was a preparatory school teacher makes the question even more nonsensical.

Problems in the use of interview

The student planned to use interview with experts from the government agency responsible for the administration of national examinations. This involved the use of 14 arbitrarily arranged unstructured items. A similar number of poorly organised items were also included in the interview schedule for use with experts involved in designing the curriculum. Apart from the faulty reasoning involved in deciding to ask wrong groups of people, there is generally little use made of data generated through interviews. For instance, one finds data obtained through interviews conspicuously missing in the research report which is typically dominated by questionnaire data. A cursory look at the Results section would reveal that the student made virtually no use of data from the interview. Nor did the report contain sample responses from the interview in the Appendix.

Little use of observation

The student included observation as a gathering device. Thus, an observation checklist made up of 13 items was reportedly used. However, there were also problems in the way it was used. For example, the list contained some items which are only remotely related to the issue being investigated. The items also addressed some aspects which are less amenable to observation. In addition, whatever data were generated through the observation appeared to have gone underreported or unreported.

Conclusions

Preliminary evidence obtained from the analysis of student work suggests that the training in research methods has not succeeded in helping students acquire a firm *knowledge* of the concepts, principles and procedures involved in conducting scientific inquiry. In addition to lack of demonstrated knowledge related to research, students' work contained little evidence to suggest that the training has enabled them to master the *basic skills* of the craft of doing research. The overwhelming finding is that students' output appeared to suffer from many flaws in design and logic. More specifically, an important observation to make is that students failed to demonstrate the knowledge and skills deemed necessary for the effective use of data collection tools for research purposes. There appeared to be gaps in their ability to apply research skills ranging from seemingly mundane but absolutely crucial ones to the more advanced ones.

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