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In Memoriam

This volume is dedicated to the memory of our late colleagues and friends, Professors Omar A. Eno and Hussein M. Adam, two respected, beloved, and competent founding members of the advisory board of JOSS.

May they both rest in peace.

Journal of Somali Studies

Mission

The Journal of Somali Studies is a peer reviewed interdisciplinary scholarly journal dedicated to advancing critical scholarship on the history, culture, politics, linguistics, and economics of Somali society and the experience of the Somali diaspora around the globe. The JOSS welcomes submissions based on original research, comparative analyses, and conceptual and methodological essays. All views expressed are those of the authors of the articles and not necessarily those of the editorial staff.

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Learning ESL in Somalia: Perceptions of Students in Mogadishu

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Abstract

This study investigates students' perceptions of learning English as a Second Language (ESL). Specifically, it aims to obtain students' views of what they consider as their areas of weakness among the four communication skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. It also seeks to understand their perceptions concerning the quality of the instructional material they use in the ESL class and the method of teaching they experience during the teaching/learning sessions. The findings reveal the existence of potential areas of weakness, some of which the learners are consciously aware of and others which they are unaware of—but which require appropriate solution in order to facilitate effective learning. In addition to the identification of the learners' areas of weakness, the study attempts to highlight possible causes of the problems and provides suggestions for further studies in order to tackle the predicament.

Key words: *education, ESL acquisition, listening, motivation, reading, SLA, speaking, writing*

1. Introduction

We as educators are responsible to create a safe learning environment for our students and beware of our biases and assumptions toward the students based on social clues. When teachers label their students, it

becomes an engine for the reproduction of inequality. —(Bilal Jibril Abdalla, 2015:2)

The aim of this study is to access the perceptions of students regarding ESL acquisition and accordingly make available some empirically embedded data of academic merit to the professionals and researchers interested in studying the situation of ESL in Somalia. It resonates with Bailey's (1991:83) perception of understanding "language learning phenomena and related variables from the learner's point of view." Therefore, it attempts to investigate the areas of possible difficulty or weakness in ESL acquisition in Somalia, particularly a sample group of learners in Mogadishu, the Somali capital. The strategic approach it has taken to achieve its findings was by collecting relevant data from ESL students.

Remarkably, concerns have been raised on the overall undesirable situation of English proficiency in Somali education, among teachers as well as among students (Eno et al., 2014:25-26). Yet the paucity of studies and written literature exploring the nature of teaching and learning of ESL in the country is evident. The significance of this study is related to the fact that English language was once a popular (if not the most popular) medium of instruction in Somalia, rising gradually from the status of official language in the northern part of the country, British Somaliland, to a medium of instruction in most schools throughout the country. The adoption of English as the medium of instruction in Somali schools at that time in the 1960s was not accidental. In fact it was a stable policy that simultaneously aimed to minimize the importance of the Italian language, which was the dominant medium in the southern Somalia schools (Laitin, 1977).

Later in 1972, the military regime of Mohamed Siad Barre introduced the Somali orthography in the Latin alphabet, which paved the way for the adoption of Somali as the national language and the medium of instruction in schools. After the ousting of siad Barre from power in 1991, the country degenerated into a catastrophic civil war which vehemently disrupted the entire national education system, without sparing the medium. However, currently resuscitating from the devastations of over two decades and half of a protracted war and subsequent civil anarchy, the lack of synchrony in the education system, particularly ESL education, has become a reigning dilemma in the country. It has created the establishment of many privately owned lower

and higher education institutions with no harmonized curriculum or medium of instruction (Eno et al., 2014, 2015). Several sources have highlighted the predicament of ESL learning as a hindrance not just to teacher education but generally to the pursuance of good quality education for young Somali students ambitious for a brighter future (Eno et. al. 2014, 2015). In order to highlight the issue, this study embarks on a pioneering path to understanding the extant of the problem through students' perceptions of acquiring ESL. The purpose is to enable Somali teachers, policy makers, educators and education authorities as well as other interested agencies involved and investing in the education sector to obtain a basic ground for knowing some aspects of the nature of the predicament in the acquisition of ESL in Somalia.

The interest to conduct this study was educed, among a variety of other factors, by the fact that I have been (and still am) involved in diverse areas of the education sector, including teacher education/training, ESL teaching at tertiary and specialized language institutions, educational leadership, curriculum development as well as designing assessment tools for learners in diverse levels and for different purposes. On the other hand, the eligibility to investigate the matter was influenced by my profound knowledge of the society, particularly the trend Somali education has been taking over the years since the 1960s, and more specifically since the 1980s when the standard of education was taking a downward spiral. At that time, key experts to national development, particularly the country's most qualified and best trained teachers, were opting to live overseas either for personal safety or in search of greener pastures.

After the collapse of the military regime in 1991, the Somali social life, education without an exemption, was destabilized beyond anyone's expectation or imagination. Even age-old experts of Somali Studies, renowned as 'the traditionalists', could neither anticipate nor produce a sufficient explanation to the scale of cataclysm that bedeviled the country. The situation was further aggravated by an uncontrollable scale of frustration caused by the magnitude of anarchy and prolonged period of statelessness that replaced the 21 years of dictatorship under the military rule of General Mohamed Siad Barre. Consequently, an unprecedented phenomenon of multi-curricula-based schools emerged; some supported through projects funded by UNICEF and UNESCO, and others managed privately by individual owners or partnerships (Eno et al. 2014; 2015).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Coping cautiously with ESL theories and controversies

Verma and Krishnaswamy (1994:346) argue, "...it is now widely felt that methodologies derived from theoretical linguistics and psychology alone often lead to contradictory classroom instruction." The scholars' discourse elucidates the controversies surrounding the area of language science and considerably how emphases are shifted from one theory/method to the other (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991:220-92; Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers 2003:14-33; John Lyons 2002:1-64). While all these studies and methods present discussions about strengths, weaknesses, agreements and disagreements, they more often than not seem to crisscross through more complex theoretical battles than provide an exclusive solution to the teachers who relentlessly suffer under the ruins of the experts' academic missiles.

Examples are far too many but we can take the debate that developed around the comprehensible input hypothesis and related intake and output hypotheses as discussed by several scholars engaged in SLA (Krashen 1981; 1982; Long 1983, 1985; Swain 1983, 1985; Chaudron 1983; Larsen-Freeman 1983). To a considerable measure of detail, these scholars attempted to exhaust factors associated with the processes of delivery and to what extent they undermine the effective standards hypothesized as useful for acquisition. But, even by focusing on the important issue of input as a route to SLA, teachers are confronted with controversies regarding some earlier studies with divergent results. For instance, whereas Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1982:411-30) hypothesize that the rate of SLA is not determined necessarily by the input quantity, Seliger (1977:263-275) supports the opinion that there exists a correlation between the achievement of the second language (L2) learners and the quantity of interaction provided as input. Studying the subject according to students' performance, Seliger demonstrates that learners who were "high input generators" during classroom interactions consequently made good use of communication opportunities other than classroom context. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1982) hold, however, the assumption that the quality of input may be more significant in the route to SLA in comparison with quantity, both of which, one would maintain, have an interplay and therefore a role to improve acquisition.

Among the contributors to the debate is Ellis (1999:13) who acknowledges scholars' divergence over the input debate by stating, "The role of input in the process of SLA remains one of the most controversial issues in current research." Ellis (1999:160-161) cites W. Fillmore's study of about sixty L2 students in four separate groups and contexts, and whose results revealed varied rates of competency in SLA. In any case, the importance of Fillmore's study is carried in his suggestion that quantity and quality both have an impact on the rate of SLA experienced by a learner. Macnamara's (1973:250-254) approach stretches the topic by contextualizing it from another very important perspective—that of diversity in motivation between the classroom and street settings, thus providing different types of contextualization. The essence of the matter related to acquisition had earlier attracted Corder's (1976:68) postulate that "The greater part of interlanguage data in the classroom is produced as a result of formal exercise and bears the same relation to the spontaneous use of language..." By this time, the teacher might still be wondering as to why the solution has become more ambiguous and the disagreements or supplements to each hypothesis more fragmented than unified into a single base.

Earlier criticisms of diverse nature have led to experts' shifting from one method of teaching to the other in search of a better approach to acquisition. Whatever the span of the controversies and the scholarly debate on methods, strategies and approaches to teaching and learning; there is a degree of consensus with Yule (2003:195) who conceptualizes, "A language situation that encourages success and accomplishment must consequently be more helpful than one that dwells on errors and corrections." It goes without doubt that potential advancements have been made in the amelioration of ESL and SLA over the years. However, and in the face of the vast research undertaken to arrest the discrepancies, Dunlosky and Rawson (2015:72) could still declare confidently that "an all-purpose technique that will solve every problem that struggling students have is not currently available."

Based on this reality, teachers and learners have to embrace the fact that there is no single available technique, method or approach that can be adopted as a panacea for dealing with the conundrum underlying SLA or ESL learning. The two scholars tend to prophesize that such a unilateral treatment to learning "will never be", particularly taking into account available evidence that "most versatile techniques have limitations" (Dunlosky & Rawson, p. 72). Here, the teachers are left

hovering in an atmosphere of theoretical cosmic but with no offer of a ready-made solution to any particular problem emanating from lack of SLA. Under this academic reality, the lack of a clear-cut panacea to learning need neither dishearten nor disappoint teachers or learners. Neither should that shortcoming be a cause for intimidation since the process of learning itself consists of an intricate net of variables; some known, and some yet unknown. In this situation, it suffices to utilize empirically proven techniques as catalysts for maximizing learner performance and consequently enhancing acquisition.

For instance, among other techniques, Dunlosky et al. (cited in Dunlosky and Rawson 2015) portray a review of several techniques some of which yielded “high” rate of successful response while others scored “low” and “moderate” in their application to learning (Dunlosky and Rawson, 2015:72-73). Out of ten techniques reviewed, Dunlosky and Rawson (2015) analyzed the 5 techniques of “summarization”, “highlighting”, “keyword mnemonic”, “imagery for text” and “rereading” as lowest effective; while the 3 of “elaborative interrogation”, “self-explanation” and “interleaved practices” featured as “moderate” in impacting learning. The highest impact towards learning is offered by (a) “practice testing” described as “self-testing or taking practice tests over to-be-learned material” and (b) “spaced practice” which means “a schedule of practice that spreads out study activities over time” (p. 73). Regardless of the multiple teaching techniques, every teacher appreciates the flexibility required to dispense a certain technique or a combination of them at the appropriate occasion as long as there is clarity of objective and student motivation.

2.2 Clarity, objectivity and learner motivation

Studies such as conducted by H.G. Birch (1945) support the idea that clarity of goals can influence learner motivation, reinforcing the rate of achievement as a result. This, though, is the objective of just one side of what otherwise requires a bilateral effort from the teacher and the learner, who both depend on a gradually designed instruction in alignment with the student’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978). As well as making reinforcement of the knowledge gained, such a program must have a potential to aid the learner in the process of maintaining good skills for the retention of what has been learned. One of the ways to develop retention should accordingly be tied

to the clarity in the objectives of the lesson. That is why Hines et al (1985:87-99) call attention to clarity which they describe as a vital component in effective teaching and learning.

Elsewhere, we are cautioned that ESL learners, similar to learners in general, are at diverse levels of readiness; a necessity to consider competency particularly the role of ZPD and its functions in teacher-learner interaction in the SLA classroom situation. Lee and Smagorinsky (2003:2; see also Smagorinsky 1995:191-212) tend to be contextualizing a similar situation in their assertion that “meaning is...constructed through joint activity rather than being transmitted from teacher to learner.” Hence a consideration of ZPD in conjunction with an understanding of its interrelatedness with language, from the perspective of constructing meaning through societal interlocution and communication in general, assists us in our evaluation of what the student already knows and what s/he is actually capable of learning in the next step up the ladder to acquisition. Consequently, it avails an avenue for dissipating learner anxiety and frustration that are likely to affect the ESL student in the stage of scaffolding.

From another continuum, we are informed that the learner’s error in trials and through scaffolding symbolizes as “...probably a clue to the active learning progress being made by a student,” (Yule 2003:194). One cannot therefore ignore that better results can be achieved when we harmonize the theory that “understood failure challenges effort,” (Wheat, 1955:319) so that the motivated learner increases the effort to overcome the challenge. At the foreground of the idea is that, albeit the enormity of the teacher’s effort, once the general learning atmosphere is contaminated by lack of motivation in the learner, then success in ESL acquisition will consequently be insufficient, if not greatly undermined. It is by virtue of that fact that Ingule et al (1996:333) opionate, “Efficiency and adequacy are increased in a motivated state of behavior.” The interlinked realities appearing here behoove us to focus on areas encompassing instruction and methodology as the core elements as well as factors related to the learner’s motivation, learning style, and ability to enhance learner competency.

2.3 Issues on competence and the principles of learning

A language situation that encourages success and accomplishment must consequently be more helpful than one that dwells on errors and corrections. – Yule (2003:195)

It is not ambiguous that among the various controversies in ESL acquisition, the grammar-translation method has been the recipient of a large share of criticism. More frequently than not, it has been accused of inability to enshrine appropriate communicative competence of learners due to the accusation of its concentration on reading, writing, and rote learning based on the memorization of the rules of grammar. The paradigmatic nature of this classroom, as the claim goes, is characterized mainly by two factors: a) adherence to direct translation method that appeals to transference of text from one language to another, and b) teacher-centeredness that deprives the learner of participation in an interactive communicative activity.

While not entirely ruling out the importance of grammar, Garrison (2003:559) relates, “A desire to use good English will lead to more lasting results than a complete memorization of grammatical form.” Perhaps the import of Garrison’s discourse is grounded on the hypothesis that: “Just as grammar grew out of language and not language out of grammar, so should the learning process first be concerned with language development.” A vast number of scholars would agree with Garrison, while yet others would look at the issue from other angles to suggest that early learners trained under that system were among the best in their time using what existed as a popular method of teaching. So it brings us back to analyze the argument that Garrison is not suggesting a complete suspension of teaching grammar from the ESL classroom. As a method, Garrison seems to suggest, grammar alone is inadequate for achieving better results in SLA, particularly among beginners who have not yet acquired sufficient experience in using the target language.

More to the argument, no amount of denial can conceal the product (learners) of the grammar-translation method who, after having learned under the approach, qualified from tertiary institutions to become experts in all areas and professions in their respective countries – including the academics. I may also remind the critics and dispossessors of the method that the latter approaches/methods have emerged not as a result of the failure of the former but arguably as part of the long process

of academic evolutions and innovations; but, which began with the grammar-translation method in the case of SLA or ESL.

The critical analysis furnished here is not intended to give the reader a misperception that I am a proponent of the grammar-translation approach or rote learning of any kind. To that end, I may confess to the fact that I am not an opponent of it either. The reason is because; I eclectically exploit the approaches as they suit the classroom context. Therefore, although I do not use it as an everyday approach, I have to admit that over the years, I have tested the relevance of this heavily criticized method on various occasions when the counterpart methods proved less helpful or even unproductive to me and to my students. The bottom-line is, when tackling some of the very demanding SLA teaching/learning situations, we may, as teachers, embrace Mick Hilleson's (1996:249) optimistic view that "[s]ince the language of instruction is English, each classroom is a language classroom for scholars," regardless of the subject learned or the method approached, as long as the lesson objectives have been achieved to efficiency and to learner satisfaction.

In fact, one may safely endorse Larsen-Freeman's (2000:19) rationale that, notwithstanding the condemnations, even for those who might "agree very little" with the method, "there are still some useful techniques associated with the Grammar-Translation Method." At this juncture, my discussion is basically to share the notion that the method is more useful than the demonic characterization attributed to it by either biased or inadequately focused critical scholars—some of whom (being handicapped monolingual linguists) had never experienced what exactly entails in the pedagogy of the ESL method – at least, not as second language learners of the English language they teach.

Often overlooked in this indictment is also the verity that it is the latter approaches that produced ESL 'teachers' (mainly native speakers) with skimpy knowledge of grammar and therefore unable to teach it to the learner's satisfaction; hence the method itself as an easy scapegoat for ineffectiveness in the SLA paradigm. The debate begs us to digest from the literary critics' anecdote conceptualizing the grammar debate in order to put an inherent caveat in order. In a symposium on "Africa's Educational Challenges for the Twenty-First Century," organized by the African Student Association, Indiana University, April 15-16, 1994, Professor Ali Jimale Ahmed shares with his audience two anecdotes on grammar:

1) A learned Arab grammarian asks a sailor if he knew something about grammar. The sailor answers in the negative. The grammarian tells the sailor that he has lost/wasted half of his life. Then while they are still on the boat, a powerful storm rocks the boat. When it is about to capsize, the sailor asks the grammarian: “Do you know how to swim?” The grammarian responds in the negative. The sailor says to the learned man, “Then you have lost all your life.”

2. A Texan who comes to Harvard, comes across a professor of English; the man asks the professor: “Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where the library is at?” To which the professor answers, “At Harvard, we do not end our sentences with prepositions.” The Texan then rephrases his question without a preposition at the end: “Excuse me. Can you tell me where the library is at, a--h-le?”

Raising this point does not mean to dispute that important components such as sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence need to take their course for effective communication to take place as the principle purpose of acquisition and interlocution. For every teacher would agree that only when these three take their functional course, along with grammar, can the learner realize the study on the rules of the language, their functions, and use in a given situation. Even so, we may borrow a leaf from Ahmed’s (1996:29) essence of language as a medium that: “writing and orality as such do not improve the quality of the message if what is written or narrated is devoid of meaning.”

Although Ahmed’s preceding statement is suggestive of a literary viewpoint of language, its relatedness to the Somali context makes his analysis relevant also to the current discourse on ESL in the country. It draws more attention to the value of meaning in language—which cannot be achieved satisfactorily or its drift and gist enjoyed in the presence of grammatical deficiency—and provokes streams of analyses relative to SLA, not only as an isolated case in Somalia but anywhere else. More contextually, Ahmed’s view of ‘meaning’ chimes with Corder’s argument that “effective language must work with, rather than against, natural processes, facilitate and expedite rather than impede learning” (1981:70), a succinct interpretation of the expediency of meaning

through the process of understanding, digesting and analyzing a written or spoken discourse in any interactive situation. In this regard, and as contended also by Ellis (1999:8), “The task of ‘cracking the code’ which every language learner faces,” demands considerable attention in order to facilitate the learner’s meaningful social communication. Enshrined in this philosophy are the values of an all-encompassing pedagogy with a potential to inspire the learner by activating his/her “intrinsic interest” towards achievement in the uphill task to acquisition (Wheat 1955:51).

In two scholarly contributions in the same year, Hulstijn (2011a&b) conceptualizes the need to distinguish between Basic Language Cognition such as pronunciation, vocabulary, used for everyday social interaction, and Higher Language Cognition (HLC) which refers to language use in the academic environment including skills in summarization of text discourses and presentation related to academic topics of discussion. Apart from the language formation, Hulstijn’s works draw from what Jim Cummins (2008, 1979) had distinguished as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), both of which function according to their relevant situations and purposes. The variance in the nomenclatures notwithstanding; both scholars’ perceptions share the same vein of concept: how ESL can equip the learner with varied categories of proficiency, dependent on the learner’s individual goal.

On the versatility of the learning process and interrelated factors, Ellis (2008:671) maintains, “There are few general conclusions that can be drawn from the research on learning style.” The ambiguity linked to the learning process, whether viewed from the perspective of ‘styles’ or ‘techniques’, keeps lingering, regardless of the research conducted over the decades. Yet, the importance of learning is emphasized in terms of “our intuitions about students,” which feeds into the “appreciation for the divergent approaches to thinking and learning” (Chapelle 1992:381). Regardless of the persistent debates on methods, approaches, techniques and so on and so forth, our focus as teachers should be on the learner’s realization of notable competency and proficiency in the target language. For, achievement of competency and proficiency in ESL is associated with superb academic accomplishment as demonstrated in Saleh Al-Busaidi’s (2017) aptly nuanced study on students of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, as featured recently in the *Asian EFL Journal*.

3. Method

3.1 Data collection

This study utilized survey to collect data by way of interview using questionnaire. Interviewing, as Kahn and Cannel (1957:149) describe it, is a kind of “conversation” essentially conducted “with a purpose.” In order to conduct the investigation from multi-dimensional perspectives, I considered engaging ESL learners for their views and perceptions. About 66 questionnaires were distributed to elementary level ESL students while 67 were spread to each of intermediate and advanced learners. In total, 200 questionnaires were distributed of which 198 were finally returned and analyzed. The questionnaire contained 4 semi-structured questions with multiple choice answers and an open ended section for further comments and personal views. Students were asked about their level of study, areas of their weaknesses in the four ESL acquisition skills, their perceptions of the instructional material they use, and their rate of satisfaction with the method of teaching they experience in their ESL classroom.

Prior to the actual data collection, three-day data collection training was conducted for a team of four data collectors and a supervisor. Afterwards, the team carried out a sampling test of 60 questionnaires which helped the researcher to review the structure of the original questionnaire from structured to semi-structured, by adding open space for further comments. During the process, some of the original questions were amended for clarity of language and size, and a Somali version was developed for those who might be uncomfortable with the original version in English. Based on that, the study was divided into two different sections and the final questionnaire for this particular inquiry was reduced to only 4 questions to avoid overloading—unlike the initial plan of 7 questions. The number of anticipated interviewees had to be minimized from 300 to 200 learners, for logistic reasons.

3.2 The target population

The target population of this study consists of both male and female ESL learners. They are comprised of students enrolled in mainstream institutions which teach ESL either as a subject or where English is the medium of instruction. Some are in the last year of their high school

studies, known in Somalia as secondary school, and equivalent to grade 12. Others are undergraduates while the most senior interviewees are pursuing postgraduate studies in institutions inside the country.

3.3 Data analysis

The substantiveness of data is measured not merely by its mode of collection, but equally by its interpretation and analysis of results. Due to the structure of the questionnaire, the preferred mode of analysis was to tabulate the frequency of the responses, using what Cartwright (1970:440) states as “unit of enumeration,” which counts frequencies of the variables within the content, as well as draw on some of the comments the learners make. The frequencies in their percentages were then used in order “to make statements about the results, identify findings and make conclusions” (Ngechu, 2006:53). In a broad sense, analyzing the data enables the researcher and the consumer of the data to reflect on the value of measurement corresponding to or describing quantitatively the variables, objects and properties under investigation while the learners’ statements provide qualitative support to the quantitative findings.

Adoption of the mainly descriptive statistical analysis is encouraged also by the limitation of generalization which in the case of this study is supposed to account only for the population it studied within the specific geographical area it covered. The caution taken here considers the lack of coordination in the current Somali education curriculum and the various media in use in the distinct institutions operating in extensively fragmented and amorphous regional administrations. However, the study does not rule out similarities in teaching and learning in all or certain parts of the country. Adoption and adaptation of curriculum, instruction material and method from one region or school to another is possible, particularly considering they all originate from what was a nationally centralized system of education that was in use before the collapse of Siad Barre’s military regime in 1991. On the other hand, more hypotheses for further research could be developed from this study in future. In this regard, the findings of this study could be used as the foundation on which to conduct more comprehensive and resourceful studies across the regions within the country, research exclusively designed for the purpose of generalization.

3.4 Validity and reliability

Throughout the different stages, the survey was undertaken while considering validity and reliability of the tool, with the aim being maintenance of stability. Hence the training for data collectors and pre-testing of the questionnaire prior to conducting the actual exercise represent strategic exercises employed for this purpose. Accordingly, Drew (1980:137) attributes the technical soundness of a study to its internal validity. In a similar view, Ngechu (p. 42) consents with Drew in her conclusion that “if the tool is reliable, then responses to it (data) are valid and therefore reliable.” The high rate of return of 198 questionnaires of the overall 200 distributed, suggests that the information collected is, to a certain degree, reliable. The source of the information, the ESL learners, on the other hand, gives ample support to the validity of the study because of their relevance to the scope and variety of areas explored in the course of the investigation.

3.5 Constraints

As every study encounters certain limitations, the process through this survey was not exempt from such constraints as it involved collecting data from three groups of diverse levels in their acquisition of ESL. Secondly, the original idea of the target venues of the study was also affected as only Mogadishu was covered; thus deviating from the primary expectation of extending the survey to three cities including Bosaaso, Baidoa and Mogadishu. The minimization of the scope was necessitated by issues on security and logistics as related to time and availability of resources, to mention a few examples. Significantly, though, while the subjects are residents of Mogadishu, the capital city, and its environs, they nonetheless hail from distinct regional and cultural backgrounds. Therefore in a way, while concentrating on learners in the same city was easy, extending the fieldwork to other areas, and accessing opinions of ESL learners in places other than the capital Mogadishu, would make the study not only richer but indeed more consumable and therefore more generalizable in nature. However, the importance of this study arises from the fact that it is the first one of its kind to demonstrate an aspect of the nature of ESL in Somalia. It stems a foundation for future ESL studies that will aim to interrogate and expand scope of the field in the country.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Level of study

Two hundred questionnaires were distributed to ESL students of three distinct levels of study comprising elementary, intermediate and advanced level. The questionnaire contained 4 questions with multiple-choice answers and an open-end for further comments. Initially 66 questionnaires were proposed for the elementary group and distributed but 64 were returned while 2 remain unaccounted for. Notably, the levels in discussion, as tabulated below, refer to the level of ESL classes and not to mainstream school grade levels.

Table 1

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Total Percent
Elementary	64	32.3	32.3	
Intermediate	67	33.8	33.8	
Advanced	67	33.8	33.8	
Total	198	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 1 demonstrates a distribution of the level of learners and the percentage each level represents among its counterpart groups.

4.2 Areas of weakness

4.2.1 Weakness in reading

About 47% of the elementary respondents believe they are poor in reading as was admitted by 5% of the intermediate students, while in the advanced group it stands at about 1% only. By average, only about 21% have a reading weakness compared to 79% who do not have any problem in this principle skill of L2 acquisition.

Table 2

Level of study	“Yes” to weakness in reading		“No” to weakness in reading		Total	
	Count	Percent	count	Percent	count	Percent
Elementary	30	47	34	53	64	32.4
Intermediate	10	5	57	85	67	33.8
Advanced	1	1	66	99	67	33.8
Total	41	21	157	79	198	100

The figures in Table 2 give reading a clean bill of health. It seems that at the elementary stage; also known in Somalia as beginner/s, reading is a burden probably due to learners’ inexperience to the complexities of English spelling, word structure/formation, vocabulary, and the nature of the English language morphology. As the level goes higher, it seems, this complexity is remedied, dropping in number and showing a considerable degree of improvement at intermediate level which also reveals more significant improvement at the advanced level.

But there is a more interesting fact here; among those who commented further in the open-ended section of the question, they unanimously agree that it is usually the teacher who reads and explains the lesson by way of L2 to L1 translation, hence the students read the lesson “if the period is not finished.” The comments give the impression that the teacher takes a more dominant role in the classroom; a reason to suspect that reading practice is not encouraged in a situation where learner participation and focus on learner output are limited. The lack of learner reading and participation in a general discussion about the passage signals to a possibility of hindrance to better comprehension. It raises the suspicion that the teacher’s guidance and support toward adequate interaction with the text is minimal.

From another standpoint, and particularly for shy learners, the lack of support in tackling the words, phrases and sentences increases the amount of timidity and anxiety ESL learners usually encounter. Consequently, it may develop into lack of confidence and therefore a threat to acquisition. This is not to disagree at all with Paul Nation’s hypothesis that “learning is [among other factors] dependent on the quality of reading and listening skills, and [that] learning is affected by background knowledge,” but rather, that the selection of the materials read and listened to and the method applied in the classroom are also potential role players that need special attention (Nation 2007:2).

4.2.2 Weakness in writing

Ninety-eight percent of ESL elementary stage students, 91% of intermediate and 70% of their counterparts of advanced learners suffer from difficulty in their writing competency. The average in this variable constitutes 86% of all levels, compared to almost 14% who express no difficulty or weakness in the writing skill.

Table 3

Level of study	“Yes” to weakness in writing		“No” to weakness in writing		Total	
	count	Percent	count	Percent	count	Percent
Elementary	63	98	1	2	64	32.4
Intermediate	61	91	6	9	67	33.8
Advanced	47	70	20	30	67	33.8
TOTAL	171	86	27	14	198	100

In writing competency, the figures display a great disparity when compared to reading, Table 2, a speculation that a crucial difficulty exists in this skill. Accordingly, the disproportion extends across all levels, suggesting that the gravity is much higher in the elementary level. The figures do not reveal significant improvement either at the intermediate section. At the advanced stage, the weakness somehow seems to have decreased, possibly under treatment and through wider exposure, though not very significantly. A great majority at 70% still believes writing remains as a threatening predicament to their acquisition, as they confirm "not much writing" is practiced in the class. Perhaps a more reliable answer could be obtained had a piece of writing assessment been assigned to every individual or a number of the students to cross-examine the validity of the responses the learners provided, as Table 3 displays their perception before a writing assessment to confirm either way.

4.2.3 Weakness in speaking

In speaking/oral communication skill, a little over 84% of the advanced learners, 91% of the intermediate group and a 100% of the elementary learners express weakness in this considerably important skill area. These are comprised of an aggregate of 181 respondents equal to 91% of the sampled subjects of the total 198 interviewees.

Table 4

Level of study	“Yes” weakness speaking		to in “No” to weakness in speaking		Total	
	count	Percent	count	Percent	count	Percent
Elementary	64	100	0	0	64	32.4
Intermediate	61	91	6	9	67	33.8
Advanced	56	84	11	16	67	33.8
Total	181	91	17	9	198	100

The weakness in speaking/oral communication exceeds all other competencies as respondents in all three levels disclose weak performance in this skill. The result unveils the presence of a serious culprit affecting the ability of learners, thus identifying ‘speaking’ as a serious predicament in all the three levels. This could be attributed to several factors but mainly due to “no chance” to practice speaking English in the class, and “we don’t speak English in the class”, according to most of the comments the learners offered in the open-end section of the question.

The absence of encouragement in oral practice in the classroom is augmented by the other deficiency of not experiencing social interactions that necessitate or require the use of English language in the social spaces outside the classroom. Both situations indicate symptoms of obstruction to learning since interactive social situations advantageous to students’ practice in English are not provided. The importance of interaction for ESL learners is acknowledged in that “as they negotiate, they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways” (Pica, 1994:494).

Complexity in the production of oral communication is commonly experienced in countries where an English speaking environment is rare in the learner’s immediate environment. Likewise, the vocabulary and other structures learned in the classroom, as well as reading and comprehension strategies developed during the lesson, remain untested in the social domains outside the class as the society is not English-speaking in the house and in other social domains. In such situations, no matter how much the motivation or the effort to produce the verbal

utterance, the handicap is likely to endure until such a time when the experience becomes available and some kind of oral practice occurs in multiple situations and across a multitude of themes. Another related factor is the “unavailability” of relevant “reading materials in the English language” such as graded readers, newspapers, novels, magazines and any other appropriate reading comprehension text which the learners can access according to their various levels.

In its wider scope as a skill, reading does not only help in the treatment of text comprehension, improvement of skills in scanning and skimming and so on, but reinforces communication strategies. Reading can and does equally function as a dialogue; interaction and interlocution with the author whose text is being digested and reflected on. In this paradigm, reading may contribute to the learners’ cognitive sophistication by exposing them to the challenges of developing strategies in making conclusions, identifying context clues, gathering main ideas, utilizing knowledge of word parts (affixes), in addition to developing skills for recalling experienced contextual use of vocabulary or gathering the meaning from the context without looking up a word in the dictionary. In the situation here, the absence of experiences advantageous to the practice of oral communication, both in-class and outside, demands further observation and an immediate solution.

4.2.4 Weakness in listening

About 76% of the respondents in the elementary stage, and 96% in each level of the advanced and intermediate ESL students do not perceive ‘listening’ as posing any serious problem to their acquisition. The result marks 89% of the 198 respondents in all three levels do not experience ‘listening’ weakness while about 11 % say they have a limitation in this principle skill of acquisition.

Table 5

Level of study	“Yes” weakness to in listening		“No” to weakness in listening		Total	
	count	Percent	count	Percent	count	Percent
Elementary	15	23	49	76	64	32.4
Intermediate	3	4	64	96	67	33.8
Advanced	3	4	64	96	67	33.8
Total	21	11	177	89	198	100

Weakness in listening skill is almost a contrastive opposite to the speaking competence in that learners admit they do not experience difficulty in listening. Interestingly though, they highlighted the “lack of use of audio recordings” and audiovisual technology supportive in the facilitation of acquisition in terms of pronunciation and/or familiarity with the aspects of negotiation that occur during interaction. In this case, learners do not experience language in use by its native speakers or near-native speaker sounds of the language; or even interactions between non-native speakers and styles of linguistic negotiations among the users and interlocutors of the target language.

Deceptively, performance in listening competence is shown as encouragingly fair and significantly ahead of the other three areas. A hypothetical assumption could be linked to the method of instructional delivery, which is reflected as teacher-dominated rather than learner-centric or interactive in nature. However, about 16% of the students reported in the comment section that they “sometimes watch English movies” and therefore listen to English being spoken outside the classroom; but “not as part of the listening activity” guided by the teacher or relevant to their level of study.

To emphasize the point (as also mentioned above under Table 2 on ‘Reading’), the traditional approach of teacher-dominated method in every class and a student “listening” passively to the same voice in the ESL class leaves a lot in generating the versatility required to be experienced in both skills areas of reading and listening. It further elicits the argument that “not experiencing” recorded audio and/or audiovisual materials may situate the ESL student yet in the dark shadow of the target language as spoken by other speakers – be them native or non-native. As a consequence, the nonexistence of the practice denies the enrichment and reinforcement which the learner would gain from exposures other than the teacher’s monotonous voice. According to Nation (2007:40), “learning through listening and reading [...] large quantities of input are needed” that motivate the learner realize tangible achievement in acquisition.

4.3 Satisfaction with the instructional material

The three levels of learners rate the instructional material in four categories with very fascinating differences; 56% consider it ‘poor’

compared to 39% who rate it positively ‘good’. The results disclose that only about 2% perceive the instructional material to be ‘very good’ while another group of about 3% rate it as ‘very poor. Among the entire respondents, 56% of elementary, about 60% of intermediate and 52% of advanced students responded their instructional material as poor.

Table 6

Details	Responses on instructional material									Total
	Very poor		Poor		Good		Very good			
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent		
Level of Study	Elementary	5	8	36	56	23	36	0	0	64
	Intermediate	2	3	40	60	24	36	1	1	67
	Advanced	0	0	35	52	30	45	2	3	67
Total		7	4	111	56	77	39	3	2	198

The largest number of students rates the instructional material as poor; a reason that attributes further complication to acquisition. The outcome relays the students’ dissatisfaction with their syllabus guide; and sadly enough, across board of all levels examined. Some of the related causes might be, as they suggest, “no good stories”, “difficult lessons”, pointing to irrelevance of the syllabus content to the level taught or that the instructional objectives are not clearly defined as to engage the learner in an interactive approach to the instruction material. This particular phenomenon needs special observation of the syllabi of the different levels in order to seek a possible treatment to the problem.

4.4 Satisfaction with the method of teaching

On evaluating the method of teaching in five categories, about 46% view it as ‘poor’; almost 39% suggest it is ‘good’; less than 3% rate it with high satisfaction as ‘excellent’, while an equivalent number perceived it to be ‘very poor’. Notably, the elementary learners constitute the highest raters in the ‘Very Good’ and “Excellent’ choices of response compared to almost 10% of the intermediate learners who viewed it as being ‘Very Good’ and thus have no complaint about the method the teacher utilizes in presenting the lesson.

Table 7

Details	Method of Teaching										Total	
	Very Poor		Poor		Good		Very Good		Excellent			
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%		
Level of Study	Elementary	2	3	28	44	23	36	8	13	3	5	64
	Intermediate	1	1	29	43	29	43	7	10	1	1	67
	Advanced	2	3	35	52	25	37	4	6	1	1	67
Total		5	2.5	92	46	77	39	19	10	5	2.5	198

According to the students’ responses, the complaint is not only about poor instructional material as we saw it above in Table 6; they similarly perceive the teaching method as poor. Due to learner disapproval and dissatisfaction with these two core elements towards ESL acquisition, namely instruction (Table 6) and method (Table 7), their impact could be affecting learner motivation by creating a possible inhibition to learning; hence a likelihood of the presence of some peculiar kind of ‘affective filter’ caused by the two variables (Krashen 1982). Gardner and MacIntyre contend that the socio-educational model to SLA demonstrates an essential process of what in practical terms occurs in the teaching/learning situation in the classroom. According to them, “Teachers, instructional aid, curricula, and the like clearly have an effect on what is learned and how learners react to the experience.”

5. Conclusion, Suggestions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study has endeavored to present perceptions of a section of Mogadishu-based ESL learners and their general view of what areas of weakness they might have in the four skills to L2 acquisition, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking. The students highlighted issues of weakness only in writing and speaking, with more emphasis on the latter. Although they did not indicate the existence of serious problems in the reading and listening skills, there is visible evidence in the study to suggest that these two skills are under-practiced and that learners are generally unaware of the benefits of students’ reading in the classroom and even outside of it. The results point to a teaching/learning approach affected by a high degree of ineffectiveness. A plausible element to this disadvantage could be related to the application of a monolithic methodology of rote grammar-translation characterized as the most

popular instructional delivery and classroom activity where the teacher takes the role of the performer and the student that of the spectator/listener. This draws a reason to suspect that the students' weakness in the oral and writing skills and other possible incompetency in listening and reading partly fringe from the paradigmatic teacher domination of the ESL class.

In this respect, one would assume that the responses informing learners' dissatisfaction with the method and instructional material similarly speak to the dilemma prevailing in the lack of sufficient acquisition; the presence of an inhibition. The learners seem to take an issue with the instruction material which sounds not to be rich enough to stimulate them to a level of good motivation and arousal of desire for concentration to more reading and textual interaction. Instead, it seems to do little to encourage or enhance the learner's aspiration to acquisition.

5.2 Suggestions and recommendations

In order to understand a broader significance of the problem, there is need to problematize the results of this study and embark on further investigation of the suspected areas relating to method and material. Similarly, more separate but detailed studies on each of the four skills would equally contribute to a better and exclusive understanding of the scope of the weaknesses and even strengths mentioned regarding the four skills examined. A wider scope of exhaustive research on individual skill areas will assist in the identification of the particular nature of the individual anomalies persistently linked to the various aspects of each skill. It is also my suggestion that a study be conducted on the perceptions of stakeholders such as teachers and policy makers in contextualizing and further problematizing a broader spectrum of ESL teaching and learning in the country. In the same avenue of thought, a study focusing on learners' level of motivation toward a better acquisition of the target language would be important so that adequate but also reliable information is collected to engage every challenge with its appropriate remedial tools. Possible remedial strategies could then be determined and designed based on the findings of the new research.

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