

Testophobia in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief interpretive report of an ongoing perception-study pertaining Testophobia among the EFL learners of Haramaya University, Ethiopia. The study primarily aims at exploring the causal factors of Testophobia from linguistic and pedagogic perspectives and secondarily, it forwards some suggestive measures to counteract the causal factors that lead to Testophobia. The respondents of the study were 174 purposively selected low-performing first year undergraduate students. As for the method of data collection, three data gathering instruments: questionnaire, unstructured interview, and classroom observation were employed to elicit the required data; whereas descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data. From causal perspective, the findings of the study revealed six vulnerable factors that lead to Testophobia followed by eight suggestive measures to counteract the six vulnerable factors.

Keywords: Testophobia, Causal Factors, Suggestive Measures.

1. INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that English has become the most preferred lingua franca globally as the number of non-native speakers of English is outnumbering the native speakers of the language. According to Mijena (2013), the historical inception of English based education in general and ELT in particular dates back to 1908. But, the present status of English in Ethiopia is quite dismal. Although Ethiopia's need for English language is more intensified as globalization is the agenda of the time, the 'depressing picture of English language teaching' never improved (Eshetie, 2010). English is foreign to most, and is known and used only by a small minority of educated, economic, and/or political elite in Ethiopia (Bogale, 2007).

Setting aside a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors responsible for the dismal state of English in Ethiopia, this paper opens a new realm of discussion by hypothesizing that "*Phobia of English in general and phobia of English test in particular deprive the learners of learning and mastering English*". To validate this hypothesis, first of all, a brief piloting was done to ascertain whether English-test-phobia exists indeed among the EFL learners or not. Having found the existence of English-testophobia among the EFL learners, a perception-study was made to explore the causes of testophobia among the EFL learners. The paper explores six causal factors of Testophobia and recommends eight suggestive measures to minimize Testophobia.

Phobia is a form of prolonged fear of a living or non-living objects; whereas, *testophobia* is traditionally defined as an abnormal and persistent fear of taking tests in academia. Simply speaking, Testophobia is the fear of failure in tests. Some of the symptoms of Testophobia are

avoiding the test, shortness of breath, irregular heartbeat, excessive sweating, nausea, dry mouth, problem in uttering words, trembling, etc.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The goal of ELT is to help the learners learn and master English rather than stuffing English (as a subject) into the heads of the students and force them to rote learning to merely pass the English test. The students often complain that they have been learning English for several years but they are not able to master it. Learning is the process of *understanding* the linguistic components of a language; whereas, mastering is the process of *using* them in a well structured way with ease and utmost perfection in speech fluency, writing accuracy, stylistic nuances, word choice, accent, etc (Jha, 2013. Apr.). Apart from several linguistic and non-linguistic causes, this study holds Testophobia responsible for the learners' poor proficiency in English. Given this, the paper poses three pertinent research questions as follows.

1.2. Questions of the Study

- 1) *Is test phobia an impediment in mastering English language?*
- 2) *Why do the learners develop English test phobia?*
- 3) *How English test phobia can be overcome?*

1.3. Significance of the Study

A number of researchers have studied the causes of fear and anxiety of speaking English in local and global scenarios, but only a few works are available on assessing the causal factors of Testophobia of taking English test. This study, for the first time, draws the attention of local (Ethiopian) and global ELT practitioners towards Testophobia of the EFL learners at Haramaya University, Ethiopia within the linguistic and pedagogical premises.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is an empirical case study as it aims to ascertain the causal factors that drive the learners to adopt a certain behaviour pattern. The study has used mixed (qualitative and quantitative) approach. The data were gathered using *unstructured interview, questionnaire, and classroom observation*; whereas, descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data.

2.1 Respondents

The sample population of the respondents was 174. They were first year undergraduate students of *veterinary science, agri-economics, and technology* departments. The respondents were purposively selected as they were found to be low-performing in the continuous assessments of a common course called *Communicative English* offered for one semester.

2.2 Data Collection Method

Three data gathering instruments: *Questionnaire, unstructured interview, and classroom observation* were employed to elicit the required data. Unstructured interview and classroom observation were made firstly to know whether 'testophobia' exists or not; secondly, to seek the spontaneous views of the participants as to the causes of testophobia.

2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data by thematically categorizing and interpreting the causal factors in descending degree of prominence, emphasis, and relativity using coding, classification, and percentile scale.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Addressing the three research questions of this study, this section has been thematically categorized into three sub-sections, namely: *Cases of Testophobia*, *Major Causes of Testophobia*, and *Remedial Insights into English Testophobia* as follows.

3.1 The Cases of Testophobia

The doughnut chart (figure 2) shows the results of a brief piloting to know the testophobic cases of 174 EFL learners. Of the total sample population, 134 (77%) students agreed to the category of 'I'm testophobic'; whereas, 21 (12%) students agreed to 'I'm partially testophobic' and only 19 (11%) students accepted that they are not testophobic.

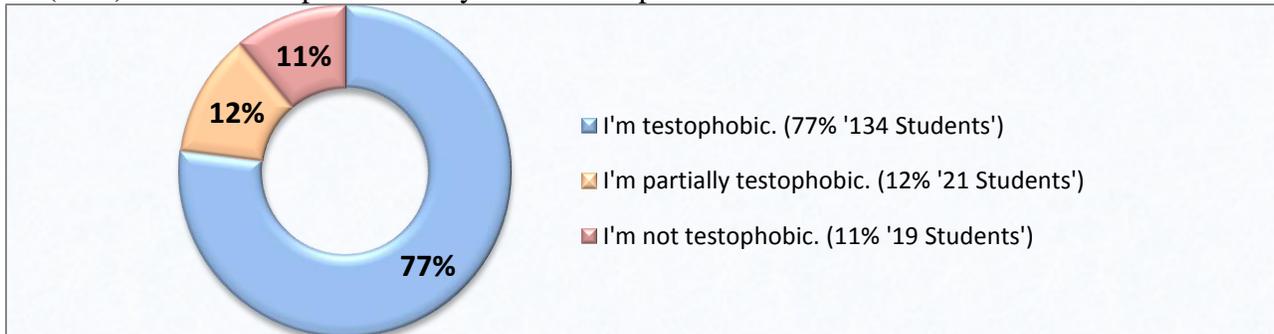


Figure 2: The Cases of Testophobia

It is imperative to add that some students pinpointed that they are not testophobic in all language tests. Hence, I had to prepare a second set of questionnaire to know their relative phobia in four language tests of listening, speaking, reading, and writing separately. In doing so, all the subjects were asked to mark the degree of their phobia based on inclusive-type-class-interval measurement scale, i.e. (1-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, 71-80, 81-90, 91-100). The following bar chart (figure 3) shows the result of the participants' perception on their degrees of phobia in four language tests separately.

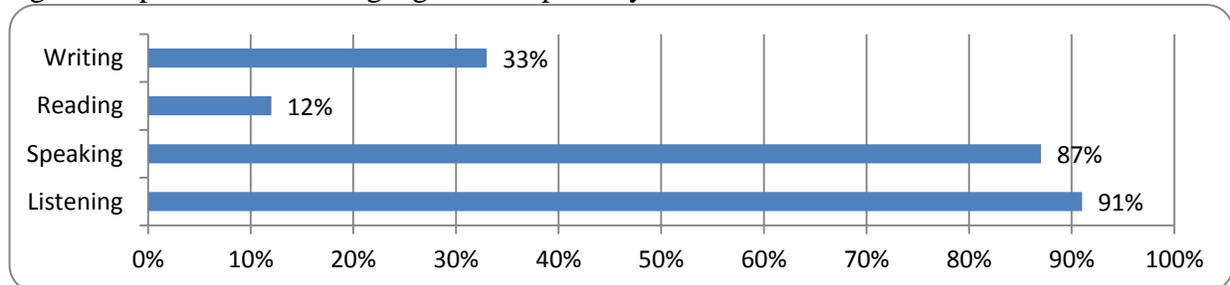


Figure 3 Degree of Phobia in Four Language Tests

The bar chart (figure 3) shows the degree of the students' phobia in four language tests separately. It is noteworthy that the students were found to be most testophobic in listening test as the cumulative average of phobia in listening test was 91%. The second most testophobic area

was speaking test as its degree was recorded 87%; whereas writing test was found to be the third testophobic area and reading was found to be the least testophobic. Subsequent to ensuring the variance of Testophobia among the four language tests, the study went for eliciting the views of the respondents on Testophobia from causal perspective. The following are the major causes that lead to the Testophobia among the EFL learners.

3.2 Major Factors Vulnerable to English Testophobia

As a result of the unstructured interview and close as well as semi-open ended questionnaire, the study explores six factors that lead to Testophobia among the EFL learners as shown in figure 4.

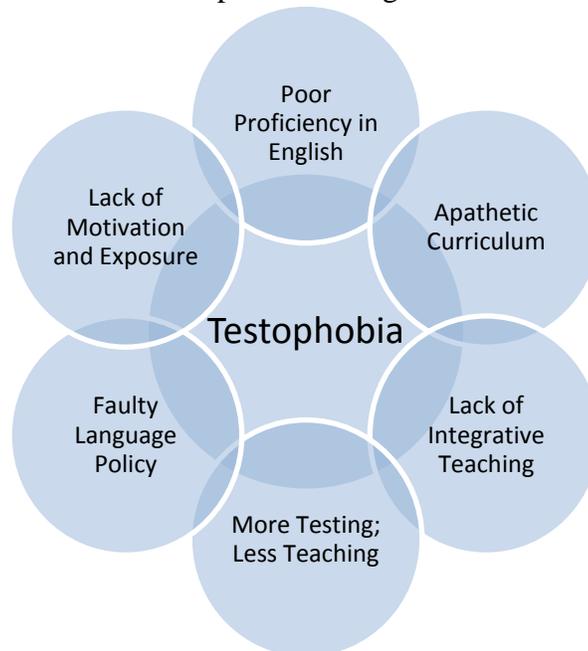


Figure 4: Factors Causing Testophobia

It is noteworthy in the radial Venn diagram that the periphery of each factor not only overlaps the periphery of Testophobia but also overlaps with one another. This representation implies that the six explored factors not only cause Testophobia individually but also holistically by reinforcing one another as a cumulative force. Now, let's move on to discuss each factor in turn.

3.1.1 Poor Proficiency in English

Poor proficiency in English refers to two intertwined concerns: communicative incompetence and lack of subject (content) knowledge. As for communicative incompetence, the Ethiopian learners are found to be lacking in both competence (knowledge) and performance (usage) of English. In this regard, it is apt to quote the remark of Bogale (2009): "Not to say of active participation in classroom activities, Ethiopian students are often deprived of understanding what they hear from their teachers or read in their textbooks". A chief cause of the learners' poor proficiency in English is late introduction of English. According to several second language acquisition theories as of Krashen & Terrell (1983), Steinberg (2001), and many others, children learn a second language instinctively up to the age of 12. Thereafter, learning a second language becomes difficult because the memory retention and the agility of articulatory organs (lips, tongue, teeth, jaw, soft palate, and hard palate) become less. By the time English is introduced as

the medium of instruction from grade 8 onwards, the students cross the age of 12 with meagre knowledge of English. Since the students learn English for a short period of time in bits and pieces by rote learning in order to merely secure pass marks in English subject, they develop a weak foundation to carry further load of advanced English during higher studies. In conjunction with communicative incompetence, the students are also found to be weak in their subject knowledge which is the root cause of their anxiety or fear of failure in the English test. Irrespective of the several causes of the learners' poor proficiency in English, here the point of emphasis is that poor proficiency (subsuming communicative incompetence and lack of subject knowledge) is the first cause of Testophobia.

3.1.2 Apathetic Curriculum

Apathetic curriculum proved to be the second major cause of English Testophobia. Apathetic curriculum refers to the curriculum that does not inculcate adequate interest in the learners to orient them to learn English language innately and enjoyably. There are four intertwined issues that make a curriculum apathetic. They are *projection of English as a subject rather than a language*, *lack of authentic materials*, *lack of interactive lessons*, and *irrelevancy between levels of learners and the lessons*.

As for the projection of English as a subject, English is prescribed as a part of curriculum like any other science or arts subject and the teachers are often concerned with finishing certain chapters of the textbook within the specified course duration. In doing so, the concept of holding test featuring different range of grades becomes inevitable for English subject too. From the very first lecture, the students are awed by the notion of continuous assessment which is held almost every week as to four language skills. Instead of nurturing the four language skills of the learners and despite knowing the fact that students are weak enough in all the four language skills, the teachers involve the students in periodic assessments simply because the curriculum specifies so.

Apart from continuous assessment, the curriculum lacks authentic materials and interactive lessons. It is an irony that Ethiopian curriculum does not pay due attention on authentic materials. The prescribed contents in the prescribed textbooks are often unreal, teacher centred, and devoid of practicum. To be more precise, the textbooks lack real life communication in terms of learners' indigenous culture, language, real life events, needs, and paraphernalia. The curriculum prescribes textbooks which are either archaic or laden with form rather than function (interactive lessons). Even though, the prescribed textbooks contain some interactive lessons, the teachers do not involve the learners in task-based interactive activities such as role play, pair and group work activities, group discussion, presentation, public speaking and so on to accomplish certain task or goal in an enjoyable manner (Jha, 2014. Jan.). Since, the lessons are more textual than contextual, a sense of monotony is found in the given lessons which ultimately adds up to Testophobia.

The fourth issue related to apathetic curriculum is irrelevancy between levels of learners and the lessons. Learners are often labeled with varied degrees of linguistic proficiency levels like *Beginner*, *Pre-elementary*, *Elementary*, *Upper-elementary*, *Pre-intermediate*, *Intermediate*, *Upper-intermediate*, *Advanced*, *Very advanced*, and finally *Proficiency level* in which learners master an L2 with precision sometimes superior to that of some native speakers (Jha, 2013. Mar.). Viewing the varied levels of learners, the paper hypothesizes that lessons should also be varied as per different proficiency levels of the learners to ensure effective teaching and learning. During the classroom observation, the students were found to show utter lack of interest towards

the delivered lessons. And their disinterest (as revealed in questionnaire and unstructured interview) was mainly due to incomprehensible words and complex sentence structures. It was found during classroom observation that there was no strategy on part of the teachers to identify the levels of the learners and prescribe the lessons to match with proficiency of the identified levels of the learners. Thus, the imbalance between learners' level and the lessons also results into the formation of three groups of students: sharp, mediocre, and weak students. Due to three varied groups of students and the same lesson for all, the underperforming students do not cope with the desirable progression of learning. Thus, the aforementioned four intertwined issues of apathetic curriculum lead to cause English Testophobia among the low-performing students.

3.1.3 Lack of Integrative Teaching

The integrative teaching, proposed by a host of scholars like Jing (2006), Larsen (2000), McDonough and Shaw (1993), Richard and Rodgers (1995), Scarcella and Oxford (1994), Snow (1991), etc., gives equal focus on four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). It hypothesizes that what has been learnt and practiced through one skill is reinforced and developed through other skills. The results of the questionnaire (as shown in figure 3) showed that the students are majorly testophobic in listening and speaking tests because the teachers groom the students mostly in *Reading* and *Writing* skills and listening and speaking go unheeded. The chief cause of this state of affairs is the lack of awareness as to the use of effective ELT methods and activities. Of the nineteen ELT methods as discussed by Jha (2013, Oct. B), more than half of them are unused, impracticable, or unfamiliar to the Ethiopian ELT practitioners. They still use traditional grammar translation method focusing mainly on writing and reading skills. As a result, teaching ends up with rules and learning ends up with rote memorization. The students do not have any access to audio-visual aids to enhance their listening and speaking skills. Thus, the lack of integrative teaching makes students testophobic in certain skill tests like listening and speaking.

3.1.4 More Testing; Less Teaching

The *test* for the students is taken in two forms: *formative* and *summative*. The former is imparted during instructional process; whereas the latter is imparted after the instructional process. Both formative and summative tests are held so often that the students always find themselves over-assessed and over-stressed. For instance, a common course namely *Communicative English* designed for 1st year undergraduate students is offered for one semester (3 months). Over the period of 3 months, the students normally undergo five to six tests of both formative and summative type. It is true that teaching-learning process should be followed by tests in order to assess the progression of learning. Viewing the current approach of testing, it won't be exaggeration to say that testing takes place more often than teaching-learning process in the EFL classroom. Concerning test, Frost (2004) has made four points against the notion of testing as follows.

- *Some students become so nervous that they can't perform and don't give a true account of their competence*
- *Other students can do well with last-minute cramming despite not having worked throughout the course*
- *Once the test has finished, students can just forget all that they had learned*
- *Students become focused on passing tests rather than learning to improve their language skills.*

Summarizing the above points, the purpose of ELT is to help learners acquire the language innately and enjoyably rather than force them to rote learning to merely pass English test paper.

3.1.5 Faulty Language Policy

Language policy of Ethiopia, according to Bogale (2009), uses multilingual or trilingual education consisting of *mother tongue + Amharic + English* in which mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction and English as a subject from the 1st to 8th grade. This hierarchy of ordering three languages as a part of multilingual education can also be viewed as Regional language + National Language + International Language. It is obvious that this pattern of multilingual education was introduced in the 1994 amendment of Ethiopian constitution to appease the sociolinguistic sentiments of the locals, but this pattern has caused more harm than good to the end users (students) because mother tongues took the driver's seat and English went on the backseat (Jha, 2013. Oct.A). Due to imposition of regional languages¹ as the media of instruction, the average Ethiopian has developed an extreme affinity towards mother tongue in order to establish distinct socio-linguistic and cultural identities. Such an affinity towards mother tongue has impaired the learners' desire to learn English as a language. Due to unwanted widespread linguistic jingoism; English is viewed as an alien subject by the learners. For lack of comprehensive English language policy in the interest of the students, the students get least exposure of English which in turn results into Englishophobia and eventually Testophobia.

3.1.6 Lack of Motivation and Exposure

Motivation and exposure to comprehensible-input² play a positive role in learning and mastering a language. In Ethiopian scenario, lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation exists because most of the Ethiopian students and teachers treat English as a foreign language rather than a second language. In other words, English is being used paradoxically as a foreign language rather than a second language because average Ethiopian believes that they can easily manage their lives without English as English is not a crutch to survive in Ethiopian society (Jha, 2013. Mar.). Secondly, according to Input and Interaction hypothesis of Krashen (1987), one learns a second language by getting exposed to comprehensible inputs. But the Ethiopian learners are deprived of adequate comprehensible input not only inside the classroom but also outside the classroom. English simply remains an entity of textbook within the four walls of classroom. Even within the classroom, the learners do not get adequate dose of English. A learner is expected to be exposed to English at least 180 minutes a day (Jha, 2014. Jan.). But the Ethiopian students are given only 170 to 175 minutes of English dose per week which is far below the expected dose of 1260 minutes per week for effective learning, and memory retention (ibid). Owing to lack of motivation in conjunction with inadequate exposure to comprehensible input, the learners develop a sense of monotony towards English subject and resort to passing the English exams by cramming unscrupulous handouts which eventually make them testophobic in the English test.

Thus, it is evident that the aforementioned six linguistic factors are by far attributable to Testophobia. From remedial perspective, the paper proposes eight suggestive measures to counteract the six vulnerable factors as follows.

¹ It is interesting to mention that regional languages are used as the medium of instruction not only for other subjects but most often for English subject too.

² Comprehensible-input coined by Krashen (1987) refers to any audio or visual entity (spoken/written) that learners could understand, such as watching L2 movies, serials, talk shows, listening radio programmes, reading news, magazine, etc.

3.2 Remedial Insights into English Testophobia

There are many ways of treating testophobic patients, e.g. exposure therapy, behavioral therapy, talk therapy, self help/hypnosis, and medicines, but they have not been found effective in the long run. They merely minimize the symptoms of Testophobia not the *thought pattern that leads to Testophobia*. Hence, this study is not concerned with discussing the remedial aspect from any therapeutic or medicinal perspective rather it simply aims at counteracting the six vulnerable causal factors of Testophobia within the linguistic and pedagogic premises. Considering the aforementioned elucidation of six causes leading to Testophobia, the paper forwards eight suggestive measures which may help learners overcome their English Testophobia.

The first suggestive measure is to introduce English not only as a subject but also use English as the medium of instruction right from nursery or first grade onwards because the memory retention and the agility of articulatory organs (lips, tongue, teeth, jaw, soft palate, and hard palate) become less along with growing age.

The second suggestive measure is to view and present English as a language rather than any other science or arts subject. A learner who studies English as a language as in private language school is not only pedagogically and communicatively better but also more productive and shrewd than a learner who studies it as a subject in school or college (Jha, 2014. Jan.). Private language schools make teaching-learning process more authentic and interactive; whereas, the college syllabus makes it more textual or bookish. In line with this, the current structural syllabus used in schools and colleges should be replaced by functional syllabus or multi-skills integrative syllabus using different types of discourse such as describing, inviting, offering, consulting, analyzing, persuading, and so on.

The third suggestive measure is to identify different proficiency levels of the learners and design different and ideal syllabi taking varied proficiency levels of the learners into account. To cope with different levels of learners, different proficiency-based classes should also be arranged for different levels of learners rather than grouping them in one class and giving them one lesson which often results into peer fear, performance anxiety, and eventually Testophobia for the underperforming learners.

The fourth suggestive measure is to enforce integrative teaching by laying equal emphasis on improving the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The majority of the respondents interviewed had expressed their concern over listening and speaking tests. Hence, the prescribed functional syllabus should contain more speech acts needed for the learners.

The fifth suggestive measure is to design less intimidating tests by laying more emphasis on functional aspects rather than form (grammar) of English language. In a survey conducted by Jha (2014), the same respondents had expressed three different views on test. Firstly, they ruled out the concept of test in initial phase of learning. Secondly, they want readymade test materials along with answer keys as outside-classroom activities so that they could solve them without any peer fear and mass embarrassment. Thirdly, they want tests only when they reach advanced phase of learning. In response to three distinct opinions of the students, the paper proposes three forms of *evaluation*. In the light of the first view on test, *unconscious evaluation* is recommended in which a teacher is expected to evaluate the learning outcome of the elementary learners by simply knowing their basic linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties and giving indirect feedback to overcome them. Unconscious evaluation is aimed at lowering the anxiety and over-consciousness of the learners as Krashen (1987) says in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, 'lower the anxiety; higher the learning and higher the anxiety; lower the learning. In the light of

the second view of the subjects, *Self Evaluation* is recommended especially for the intermediate learners. It enables learners to test and correct themselves using online/offline tests mainly to avoid any sort of peer fear or embarrassment arising out of poor scores or grades. Given the third view of the subjects, *conscious evaluation* is recommended for the upper intermediate learners to measure their performance as well as competence in terms of phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and stylistic aspects of the language. Performance-based assessment "represents a set of strategies for the application of knowledge, skills, and work habits through the performance of tasks that are meaningful and engaging to students" (Hibbard, 1996).

The sixth suggestive measure is to make amendment in language policy of the country. In doing so, the status of English has to be prioritized by reversing the current pattern of trilingual education from (Mother Tongue + Amharic + English) to (English + Amharic + Mother Tongue) as illustrated in figure 5.

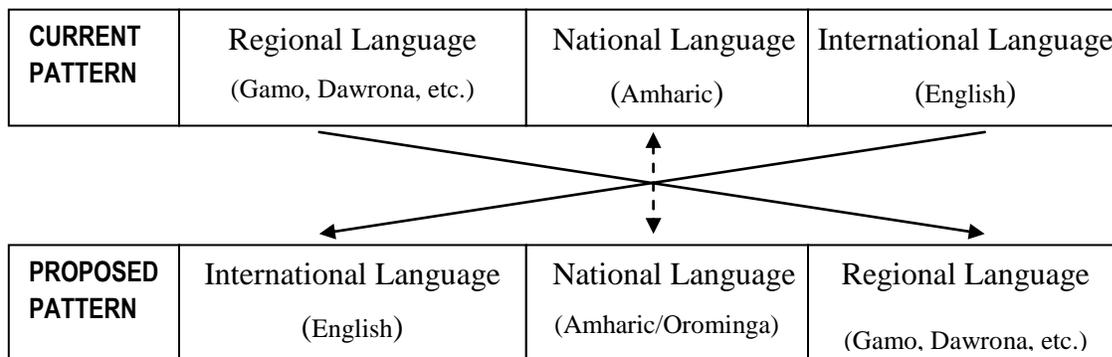


Figure 5: Proposed pattern of reversing the current pattern of trilingual education³

The figure 5 shows regional language at the first place as a medium of instruction in the current pattern of trilingual education; whereas, the proposed pattern suggests to shift it to the third place in terms of priority and bring in English (international language of wider communication) from the third place to the first place as a medium of instruction from nursery grade to higher education. As far as the place of Amharic as a national language is concerned, it has been retained at its place without any shuffling. It is imperative to add that proposed pattern has no intention of undermining or glorifying any particular language rather it has been suggested simply from pedagogical perspective for the overall academic well-being of the students. And, unless English is prioritized in Education from nursery to higher education as a subject and medium of instruction, the Ethiopian students will continue ending up with English phobia and Testophobia in English test.

The seventh suggestive measure is to motivate the students by inculcating positive attitude towards learning English. For this the learners need to be given both intrinsic (enjoying language learning on one's own) and extrinsic (external factors such as creating fear of negative consequences of not learning English, parental pressure, meeting social and academic expectations, giving admiration for good performance with rewards and incentives) motivation.

The eighth suggestive measure is to give maximum exposure of English to the learners. A language is better learnt by getting immersed in the speech community of that language, so the need arises to start English Immersion Programs and have more and more English community clubs so that the learners could know and use real communication. Both the teachers and the

³ The proposed pattern of trilingual education first appeared in Jha (2013, Oct.A).

learners should be given a chance of assimilating with the natives either by sending them to the English speaking countries as a part of Summer Immersion Abroad Programs for a considerable period of time or by inviting the natives to the local ghetto (Jha, 2013. Mar.).

4. CONCLUSION

In the light of the results and discussion, the paper concludes that the learners are gripped with English phobia in the first place. The intensity of phobia multiplies as the students enter higher grades or education to such an extent that it takes the form of Testophobia eventually. Regardless of various factors that may attribute to Testophobia, the present study looks into the issue purely from linguistic and pedagogic perspectives. In this pursuit, the paper has explored six vulnerable factors (3.1.1 to 3.1.6) that lead to Testophobia. Thereafter, from remedial perspective, the paper forwards eight suggestive measures to counteract the six causal factors that lead to Testophobia. Summarizing the findings, it is apt to reiterate that the goal of ELT (English Language Teaching) is to help the learners learn and master English rather than bludgeon them into rote learning to merely pass English test paper. In present scenario, the learners are way away from getting rid of Testophobia because the remedial prospect looks very bleak amid growing linguistic jingoism in the country. As an instant remedy of Testophobia, the Ethiopians need to embrace English wholeheartedly by using it as a second language rather than a foreign language.

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