Exploring the conditions of English language education through the experience of Eritrean Sophomore English language learners and teachers: An ecological perspective

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This study addresses the little studied context of English language education in Eritrea. Despite the teaching of English as a subject and the forward-looking mother tongue policy implemented in Eritrean elementary education, Eritrean students struggle to cope with English as the medium of instruction from the start of junior school to the end of tertiary education. This qualitative study analyses sixteen sophomore student interviews and six teacher interviews to critically explore the conditions of English language education in Eritrea. Using an ecological perspective, the findings from this study highlight how the affective, didactic, study and linguistic conditions interrelate with one another to form the characteristic features of the English language education ecosystem and provide insights into the different ways participants within this ecosystem respond to these conditions. The aim of this study is to better understand what supports and hinders students' language development in order to be able to support the reformation and transformation of English language education in Eritrea.

Keywords: English language education, ecological perspective, individual environment relationship, environmental conditions

1 Introduction

Language as a social practice plays a profound role in the socialization of individuals, communities, societies, and nations through the building of relationships and sharing of cultural understanding across time and space (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017). Language socialization acknowledges the importance of language as the mediator of meaning and its formative role in introducing –

socializing – newcomers to their place and potential within the immediate and the international community (Friedman, 2021). Moreover, while a significant body of research has investigated language socialization in first and second language environments, less research has been conducted in English as a foreign language (EFL) in multilingual settings.

In many African countries including Eritrea, multilingualism has a central position in language teaching (Turnbull, 2018) yet the nature of language discourses and preferences in classroom practices between English medium education (EME) that refers to English as the medium of instruction (MoI) where it is not the mother tongue of the learners, and mother tongue education (MTE) in schools is an unresolved issue (Ansah, 2014). EME is often preferred (Mohr & Ochieng, 2017) and has the socio-geopolitical alignment of nationwide elites and being seen as the linguistic means of achieving global citizenship (Trudell, 2016) and attaining economic success (Obondo, 2007). Due to the landscape of English language hegemony, many African countries consider English as a resource and continue to invest and promote EME as a shortcut to a high level of competency in English (Kedzierski, 2016) though it lacks cultural grounds. English is simply confined within classrooms with little access outside the classroom (Trudell & Area, 2008). This might have a disempowering effect on teaching and learning because students do not have sufficient ability in English to achieve grade-appropriate subject knowledge (Clegg & Simpson, 2016). As English plays such a dominant role as the medium of instruction (MoI) in so many different educational systems, it is important to understand how the conditions of different environments inform the language learning experiences of students. This study uses an ecological perspective to explore the conditions of English language education (ELE), that is how students learn English at different levels of education, in Eritrea.

Eritrea, in the Horn of Africa, comprises diverse landscapes, peoples and cultures with nine ethnic groups living in the highlands and lowlands plains. Languages coexist in this multilingual nation with overlapping, heightened and complex socio-cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical diversities reflecting the mosaic nature of the country (Pollera 1996). As part of this mosaic (see Figure 1), rather than recognizing official languages (Asfaha et al., 2008), Eritrea follows an 'all languages are equal' policy (Negash, 1999, State of Eritrea, 1997) allowing for the presence of multiple languages within society and education (see Figure 2). However, ethnic languages are rarely used in government offices, workplaces or beyond elementary schools with Tigrigna used as a formal function in public offices, English being the working language of higher public offices and institutions of higher education and Arabic being the preferred medium of communication for some Eritreans due to religious and cultural affinities (Mohammad, 2016; Hailemariam et al., 1999). This multiplicity of languages is also reflected in the Eritrean educational system.
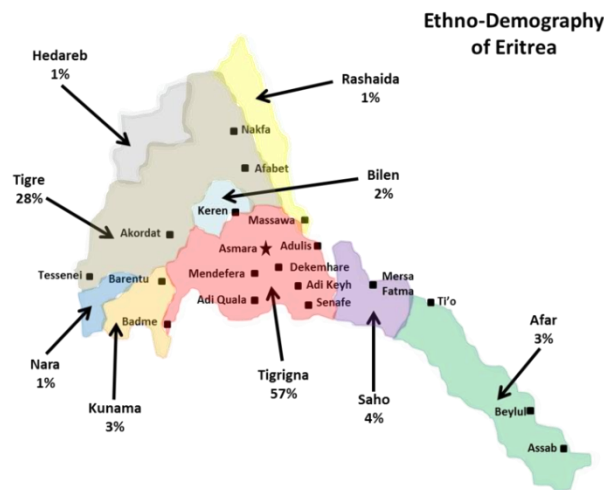
Figure 1. The mosaic of languages and ethnic groups in Eritrea, Tron9698, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

According to their demographic share, the Semitic languages Tigrinya and Tigre use Ge'ez script; the Nilo-Saharan languages Kunama and Nara, the Cushitic (Afro-Asiatic) Afar, Saho, Blin and Hedareb use Latin script and the Rashaida use Arabic script. (Asfaha et al., 2008, Bereketeab, 2010).

1.2 The Languages of education in Eritrea

The Eritrean educational system includes pre-school (2 years; learners age: 4-5 years), elementary school (5 years; 6-10 years old), junior school (3 years; 11-13 years old), secondary school (4 years; 14-17 years old) and tertiary education (4-5 years) (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2016b). The MoI for education in Eritrea has long been a critical consideration. During the Italian period (1882-1941), education was provided in Italian for a small proportion of the population up to grade 4. During the British period (1941-52) the number of years in school were extended, Tigrigna and Arabic were the mediums of instruction (MoI) in elementary school depending on the locality with English taught as a subject from grade 1 until it became the MoI in junior school. This set-up continued during the Federal period (1952-61). Under Ethiopian governance (1961-1991), the MoI in elementary school was Amharic with English taught as a subject from grade 1 and the MoI from junior education onwards.

Today Eritrea maintains a mother tongue (MT) policy for elementary education with English taught as a subject from grade 1. This multilingual policy is based on a pluralist approach to the language of education (Hailemariam, 2002; Asfaha & Sjaak, 2011) and the understanding that when children use their mother tongue (MT) throughout elementary education, they can quickly learn another language as the cognitive and meta-linguistic foundations have already been laid (Ball, 2010; Thompson & Junkyu, 2012). While this policy accommodates the socio-cultural and linguistic identities of students, how to prioritize the patterns of language learning starting from K1 to 12 grade is yet to be established. In practice Tigrinya has become a de facto MoI, but this does not serve the needs of all students (Asfaha, 2013; Mohammad, 2016), moreover, the switch to English as the MoI in junior school is demanding for both students and teachers. Nevertheless, ELE is part of formal education in Eritrea throughout junior, secondary and tertiary education.

Over the years, initiatives have sought to promote students' English skills. In 1993, an Eritrea-UK collaboration promoted a learner-centered communicative approach to ELE. This project aimed to improve "teacher effectiveness at all levels, the quality of and access to, textbooks and other instructional materials, the effectiveness of English language examinations … and better indicators of ability…" (MoE, 1993, p.1). Despite the multilingual policy and the aims of the Eritrean National Curriculum Framework (MoE, 2008) to ensure that learners develop proficiency in English and operate at sufficient levels of competency to enable Eritrea to play its full part in the global community (EIT, 2015), students often struggle to attain mastery of English.

The school location (rural and urban) and type (public 91.5%, private 8.5%) in Eritrea can impact students' language proficiency significantly. Public schools are administered by the Ministry of Education and private schools administered by religious missionaries and domestic and foreign community schools (MoE, 2016a). Generally, more urban schools have better quality teachers and resources than rural ones. Private schools provide a better education than public schools in terms of teacher quality, resources, school management, and parental involvement (Benveniste et al., 2013).

The reasons for students' low English proficiency seem to be the lack of basic learning and teaching materials, shortage of qualified teachers, and the low proficiency of teachers, insufficient resources, unconducive school environment, lack of motivation and commitment on the part of teachers and students (Asfaha 2009; Rena, 2007). To overcome the shortage of English teachers, the Ministry of Education has employed non-English language graduates from various colleges. Idris et al. (2017) argue that the deployment of graduates without teacher education creates further resentment towards teaching and learning in schools despite the good intentions.

Unsurprisingly, under these conditions, student achievement remains low and the struggle to master English continues. In 2001, a reading survey in eight languages and English indicated that children who completed grade 3 were reading at grade 1 level and English reading results were low across all grade levels in the country (MoE, 2002). Moreover, the Monitoring Learning Achievement project (MoE, 2009) reported that primary students studying in a MT with a shorter written history performed poorly in language learning. The national educational policy (MoE, 2011) highlights the need for empowering teachers, enhancing their status, motivation and professionalism as well as developing curriculum that is appropriate to the learning needs of children and relates the context of the Eritrean socio-economic needs. As a number of years have passed since these reports and as language proficiency has significant ramifications for overall educational achievement, there is a clear need to examine the current and underlying conditions for ELE in Eritrea. Responding to this need, this study uses an ecological perspective to explore the conditions of ELE in Eritrea from the perspective of college students and their teachers.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 An ecological perspective on language education

To be proficient in a language means to be able to use a language, to understand meaning shared and constructed through the language, and to "display creative and critical thinking through the language" (Kabilan, 2000, p. 1). Although students can follow various language learning pathways to develop FL proficiency, the dilemma of students studying English for years, yet failing to develop language proficiency has received considerable research interest (e.g., Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Language researchers continue to seek a better understanding how the conditions of language learning inform language development (e.g., Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2013; Spolsky & Sung, 2015; Oxford, 2016) by focusing on the ongoing negotiation between the individual and the environment in the development of shared ecosystem (e.g., van Lier, 2010). The ecosystem is the basic brick of ecology (Gignoux et al., 2011) that consists of a population of individuals living in their environment, and the inter-relationships that obtain between the individuals and the environment as well as between members of the population (Do Couto, 2014).

From an ecological perspective, the relationship between individuals and the environment is mutually-constituting. On the one hand, the environment provides opportunities for different kinds of action, that is affordances, and on the other hand, individuals decide how to use these opportunities, in effect reforming the environment (van Lier, 2000; Ochs & Schieffellin, 2017). The interplay between the responses of the individual and the affordances of the environment can promote and inhibit the potential of the overall ecosystem (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013) and lead to the formation of recognizable ecosystems (Godfrey & Brown, 2019). To take the example of a seed sown in plastic rather than in soil, the seed will initially grow relying on its own resources as it seeks for further nourishment. As plastic affords minimal nourishment, however, the plant's growth will be curtailed, and the seed will not attain its full potential. In this example, the plastic represents the environment, the lack of nutrition is a condition of the environment, the initial growth and subsequent demise of the seed represent the response of the individual, and the ecosystem is characterized by the formation of individual-environment relationship. Through the ongoing interaction, however, the emergent features of an ecosystem begin to develop and habitual ways of participating form (Dewey, 1933).

Language socialization paradigms also recognize the nested influence of linguistic and cultural conditions in student development and the bidirectional relationship between individuals and the environment (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017; Friedman, 2021). In the isolated setting of Eritrea, however, English is "a neutral language without a strong social or political base" (Woldemikael, 2003, p. 123) little used outside classrooms. This research, therefore, draws on an ecological perspective (Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017) to explore the conditions of ELE in Eritrea rather than assume that English belongs to the community. Early examples of ecological approaches in language education research include Strawn's (1981) conditions for success in language learning and Spolsky's (e.g., 1989) general conditions. The general conditions include the linguistic basis for second language learning, the significance of the social context and individual factors that affect

language learning including: the freedom to learn, a genuine need for communication and practice, feedback on one's language use, the time for learning, attitudes and motivation of the language learner. Language researchers have also used ecological approaches to support observation-in-action in contexts in which language use and language learning are situated (Duff & van Lier, 1997), to revise the theory-practice relationship in pedagogical decision-making (Tudor, 2003), and examine materials in language classrooms (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Lemieux, 2017) and activity-based curricula (Hahn & Rodriguez-Kaarto, 2015). Ecological perspectives provide tools for understanding how the conditions influence learners' emotional language experiences like anxiety and resilience in language education (Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017), and for identifying motivational affordances and trajectories of language students (Pham, 2016).

Different studies highlight how an ecological perspective is "helpful in capturing holistically the complex processes that take place within learners and between learners and their sociocultural environment" (Ushioda, 2015, p. 48). It is important to note, however, that an educational ecosystem forms through the ongoing interaction of proximal and distal participants (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013) within an institutional environment (Godfrey & Brown, 2019). In this study, we examine the conditions of the Eritrean ELE ecosystem based on interviews with students and teachers from two tertiary education colleges.

2.2 Research questions

In order to explore the complex conditions of ELE in Eritrea, an important starting point is to recognize the synergistic interrelatedness between the conditions of the environment and the responses of the participants, that is students and teachers of English. This study seeks to explore how the conditions of the environment inform and are formed by participants' responses to create the ecosystem of ELE in Eritrea. The research questions are:

1) What kinds of conditions are outlined in the college student and teacher interviews?
2) How do these conditions inform the ELE ecosystem in Eritrea through the participants' perspective?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study are college students concluding their formal English language studies and teachers from two streams: Natural Science, at the Eritrea Institute of Technology (EIT) and Social Sciences, from the Adi-Keih College of Social Sciences. For the purpose of this study, sixteen students and six teachers were selected. The students, aged between 20 and 27 years, were chosen based on their freshman English results with eight high-performing (HP) students (four males and four females) and eight low-performing (LP) students (four males and four females) from each stream. The selected participants represent the sociolinguistic make-up of Eritrean society. The students were selected based on their geographic (region, school location (rural and urban), school type (private

and public), gender, religious, ethnolinguistic identity and sociolinguistic categories (EIT students' enrollment biodata, 2018). They are from four different Eritrean languages, Afar, Bilen, Tigre and Tigrinya that use Ge'ez and Latin orthography and from Kunama, Nara, Hidarib and Rashaida hardly join the Institutes of Higher Education (Students' enrollment, 2013- 2019).

The student participants are from four ethnic groups and each participant is multilingual (see Table 1) who were selected to provide different perspectives on ELE in Eritrea based on their extensive experience of ELE at school and college levels. The teacher participants were selected due to their extensive experience of working with students as they conclude their formal ELE journeys.

Table 1. Background information on participating students

Identifier	Major	Mother tongue	Language repertoire
HP1	Natural Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English & Arabic
HP2	Natural Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, Arabic & English
HP3	Social Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English & Arabic
HP4	Social Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English & Arabic
HP5	Social Science	Tigre	Tigre, Arabic, Tigrigna & English
HP6	Social Science	Bilin	Amharic, English, Tigrigna, Bilin, French, Italian, Arabic & Geez
HP7	Natural Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English & Amharic
HP8	Natural Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English, Arabic & Amharic
LP1	Natural Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English & Arabic
LP2	Natural Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna & English
LP3	Social Science	Tigre	Tigre, Tigrigna, English, Arabic & Amharic
LP4	Natural Science	Afar	Afar, Tigrigna & English
LP5	Social Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, Arabic & English
LP6	Social Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna, English & Arabic
LP7	Social Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna & English
LP8	Social Science	Tigrigna	Tigrigna & English

Table 2. Participating English language teacher backgrounds

Identifier	Gender	Teaching Exp – yrs	Number of languages
T1	M	15	3
T2	M	25	4
T3	M	15	3
T4	M	10	3
T5	F	20	3
T6	M	20	3

The first author conducted pre-interview discussions with the participants and provided detailed information on the purpose of the study and the utility of data for research purposes. Each participant provided signed consent and indicated their understanding of the confidentiality and privacy that refers their participation, voluntarism and information regarding the study (Cohen et al., 2002). Each participant was assigned with an identifier as indicated in Table 1 and Table 2.

3.2 Instruments

Interview data was collected to provide insights into the conditions of ELE in Eritrea based on the "active interactions between two or more people leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). Relatedly, Cohen et al. (2007, p. 29) described that conducting interviews is "a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings in a natural setting". Additionally, employing interviews allows the participants to "speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings" (Berg, 2007, p. 96)

As little research has been conducted on the conditions of ELE in Eritrea the interview questions were designed to elicit information on the linguistic basis for learning English, the social context of ELE and individual factors that affect ELE. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The language of the interviews was primarily English, unless participants preferred to use Tigrigna. The recorded data was transcribed and translated resulting in 352 pages, font size 12 and 1.5 line spacing. To manage this extensive dataset, a theory-driven analysis (Tracy, 2019) drawing on the ecological perspective was used to guide the initial coding focusing on the presence of different types of conditions mentioned by the participants. The secondary-level coding continued by organizing the codes into manageable sets by collating together codes from overarching themes: the system, the teachers, the students and the role of language. To further consolidate the predominant themes with the managed dataset, an abductive research approach was an effective tool to ensure findings are grounded within the themes of different entry points (Thompson, 2022). Whilst each theme represents a distinct perspective or role within the ELE ecosystem; it is the interaction between these themes that forms the overall ELE ecosystem (van Lier, 2010). An example of thematizing the data is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematizing the data

Extract	First level: Types of conditions Data-driven	Second level entry points: Conditions of ELE ecosystem Theory driven	Key features of the language education environment
Teachers only focused on grammatical rules and skipped writing, speaking and listening practices in the textbook (LP7) Teachers spend time to teaching grammar because school and national examinations mainly focus on the structure of the language …Schools and teachers' excellence is evaluated on the basis of the students who pass the exams. (T1)	Conditions formed in relation to teachers Conditions related to the system	Linguistic conditions	Imbalanced handling of key skills with emphasis on grammatical accuracy

4 Findings

The findings outline the key features of the ecosystem of Eritrean ELE according to the participants. The four themes provide four different 'entry points' to examine the various conditions that characterize the current ELE ecosystem. The interrelatedness of the four entry points is addressed in the Discussion.
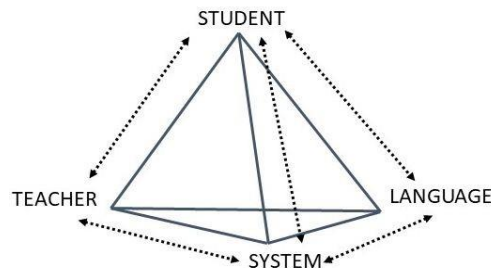

Figure 2. Interrelated entry points for the ELE ecosystem

4.1 Conditions related to the system

The systemic conditions are those which students and teachers have little direct influence on, including the recruitment of teachers themselves. Common challenges in Eritrean ELE, however, are the large class size and teaching materials. Many participants noted that class size affects classroom activities, teachers' methodology, assessment practices and students' freedom to learn. As T1 stated, 'Class size is a big burden that hinders teachers to give individual attention and practice communicative interactive classroom activities'. T6 expressed his indignation, 'even if I want to initiate and give feedback, there is absolutely no way to give them opportunities to interact in a class of 60-70 students', reiterating a common sentiment that limited resources promoted lecture-based teaching. Participants were also concerned that the continuous assessment systems in overcrowded classrooms allowed students to pass exams without studying by simply copying from the more proficient students, which perhaps explains why some students purportedly cannot construct simple sentences in secondary schools.

The instructors in particular stated that a lack of authentic supplementary materials and technology-based resources negatively affect ELE. In schools, textbook-based materials are adequate in number, but are not seen to help students communicate in the real world. At the college level, the absence of standardized course formats for freshman and sophomore ELE was compounded by the lack of materials. As many students and teachers explained, 'Students struggle to get printed handouts and fail to follow the lessons properly as teachers rely heavily on them' (T1). Through modern technologies, however, language learning can be transformed. As T6 notes 'with relatively low-cost technology like mobiles for example…even very basic mobiles… mini-stories [can be] transcribed [and downloaded] into the memory sticks, the memory cards … A simple printer, photocopier or a laptop cater for hundreds and hundreds of students'. As HP3 said, 'In this modern world, everything is at hand. You don't need piles of books in hard copy. There are e-books, videos and audio books. It is carrying the library at your hands'.

It is not, however, only the lack of resources that inform the conditions of ELE, but also existing practices, such as the practice of supervision. One participant explained that 'The criteria of being a good teacher is determined not only by his

teaching ability but also by the number of exercises that he marks... encouraging him to focus on grammar than giving writing practices as it takes time to correct them'. Moreover, as HP7 said, 'Teachers' and schools' excellence are evaluated based on the performance of students in these examinations, not how many of their students are able to communicate proficiently'. Under these conditions, teachers may well overemphasize grammar and skip important language skills and, as T1 and T6 explained, teachers devote time to teaching the structure of the language and focus on promoting students to pass school and national examination, regardless of their English language proficiency levels. As T1 stated, 'What is in the policy (curriculum) and what is going on in the ground are just as the palm and the back side of the hand'. This perceived gap between the curriculum and practices in ELE is exacerbated as teachers cannot simply teach English skills when the national examination focuses on grammar and students begin to consider learning the other skills as waste of time and do not want teachers to teach them outside the exam items.

As English is the MoI from junior school on, ELE plays a crucial role in preparing students for this transition and supporting the study of other subjects through English. Many participants, however, pointed out that although English is the MoI, many students' English proficiency remains minimal throughout the educational system. This lack of proficiency was explained by the low quality of teachers and the absence of English outside the classroom.

 According to the participants, many English teachers lack pre-and in-service training. Although teacher education has a long history in Eritrea, today for the most part, 'teachers remain less/not trained at all to teach English. If they are available, they are inadequately prepared' (T6). As T1 stated, 'Non-English language graduates who lack subject content-pedagogical knowledge are employed to teach English'. T4 bluntly pointed out that a key problem with English teachers 'is their incompetence in English language itself'.

As explained by T2 and T6, schools in remote areas are run by unqualified teachers where little support is available, and teachers do not share a common language with their students. It is perhaps unsurprising that under these systemic conditions, teachers who are incompetent in English switch to a dominant Eritrean language, mostly Tigrigna, and communication with students is lost, moreover as HP6 explained 'students instead of learning the English language, [are…] unlearning it'. At this point, the findings turn to conditions formed in relation to teachers.

4.2 Conditions formed in relation to teachers

The findings from the study indicate how the low proficiency and shortage of qualified teachers influence ELE. It is unsurprising that unqualified teachers lacking English proficiency are demotivated and draw on a restricted range of methodologies relying primarily on teacher-fronted lectures, textbook-based teaching and exam-oriented tasks with drills and rote memorization of rules. Participants reiterated the point that communication in class interaction is unidimensional, and teachers seem to spend most of the time writing on the board, explaining and giving corrections, and engaging students in meaningless reading rather than create the conditions for students to communicate and use the language. These methods exclude interaction and pacify learners.

The student and teacher participants shared a wide sense of frustration and dissatisfaction within the teaching body due to the low salary and inadequate

school administration, large class sizes, disinterested students and poor student-teacher relationships. Teachers are further limited by their fear being reassigned to remote schools and having to follow rigid lesson plans, forcing teachers to 'rush without giving much time to the lessons almost missing important language skills' (T3). Moreover, the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students is further undermined by the absence of feedback or limited written feedback that focuses on errors with no indication on how to improve. Some student participants noted that even at college level if teacher-student conferencing is available, however, students 'are unwilling … because they are scared to face their teachers' (HP8) indicating how affordances can become missed opportunities.

One significant condition is the way in which teachers view students as inadequate learners. Educators drew attention to the deficient level of many sophomore English students, as although 'English being a medium of instruction at all levels, college students have difficulties to write even simple paragraphs and required to return to the basics when they reach freshman level!' (T4). Moreover, although most students are not fluent in English, they underrate the language and spend little time improving their proficiency. Students appear to have contradictory opinions regarding English, defending themselves by saying on the one hand that English is a simple language, a subject not a skill to be developed, and on the other hand, also saying that native-like pronunciation is desirable. Many good performing students and instructors, however, argue that having native accent is not priority: 'The main reason for learning a language is to communicate. They think having a good accent is a luxury' (HP8). Under the current ELE conditions, students appear to develop misguided perceptions towards learning English even when they join the college. Sadly, students long to see the end of learning English as LP7 described, '…. I wait for suffer more year to end to imply sophomore English'.

4.3 Conditions in relation to students

Given the difficult conditions that teachers face and to some degree contribute to, it is unsurprising that students often struggle in ELE. The general conditions depicted so far, however, do not have a uniform effect on students as their individual abilities, proficiencies and perceptions also contribute to the conditions of ELE. The findings from this study indicate how variations between individual students are also formed through limited opportunities to practice skills in and outside the classrooms, significant background differences in learning English, unsuccessful L1 learning experience, the exam-oriented assessment system, the quality of teachers and lack of classroom support.

The inadequacy of the current conditions experienced by the students is highlighted in the mismatch between students' performance in English language exams and their overall language performance. As LP1 shares, '…though I am weak in English ….my poor ability didn't affect me in my grades at school and at freshman first semester because the assessment systems were grammar ridden exams…but at sophomore level, my real level was revealed as there was much focus on writing. I got bad grade'. Many participants point to the imbalanced assessment of skills, clash between the curriculum, classroom practices and both school-level and national examinations.

The student participants explained that they often begin with high motivation and positive attitude towards learning English believing it affects their wider education but their motivation diminishes as they experience the absence of freedom

to learn the language. Almost all students expressed shared feelings of boredom, dejection and frustration while learning English. An outstanding student explained:

> There was this class… dedicated to corrections. So, when I already had full marks, … I used to go in the corner and I had a book... I was reading that when he came to me and took the book and ripped it apart and said, "You have to focus no matter what it is. You think you are good enough, better than me?" something like that. Yeah, sometimes it felt boring. But it had to be done I understand him. But it was not like I was underestimating him. I was only bored with the class corrections. (HP1)

In other instances, students shared how teachers threaten students with grades and make disparaging remarks about mistakes. Remorsefully, LP1 remembers his childhood experience: 'the teachers intimidate you in front of large class size whenever you make a mistake, they would hold their heads [to exaggerate its severity] and say, "If the native speakers listened to you, they would laugh at you"'. The surrounding conditions made many students feel they have no choice other than to be the way the teachers want them to be.

The ELE ecosystem is also affected by the way students view teachers' proficiency leading to the impression that English as a language is ill-treated in the hands of unqualified and unmotivated teachers. This critical perception is also present in the reflections on the quality of teaching materials as the students noted textbooks do not help to develop their skills and become autonomous learners. This mismatch was also recognized by the teachers, who further explained that textbooks tend to ignore the students' difficulties and fail to provide any sense of continuity in language development. Before turning to the interrelationships between the different conditions, however, the final condition addressed in the findings concerns the multilingual repertoires of Eritrean students.

4.4 Linguistic conditions of Eritrean ELE

As a nation, Eritrea has a wealth of linguistic resources as indicated also by the multilingual backgrounds of the participants. Moreover, the forward-looking mother tongue policy of elementary education should provide a good foundation for further language learning, and the teaching of English as a subject in the early grades should support the transition to English as the MoI in junior school. The findings from this study, however, indicate that currently teachers and students are rarely able to benefit from the multilingual affordances of ELE in Eritrea.

One problematic condition pointed out by the participants was the imbalance in teaching the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as the dominance of grammar. The findings suggest that in addition to having limited opportunities to practice the four skills, listening and speaking are mostly left out whereas 'reading is overemphasized because of the welfare of the class size and purposeless reading practices are given to the students: 'everything (even a dialogue) becomes a reading exercise ...., they just ask them to read' (T6). This lack of practice in the language skills has significant ramifications for students' language proficiency. Moreover, the student participants pointed to the significant differences between urban and rural areas, public and private schools.

Whereas HP5 shared having had the opportunity to learn the four skills by attending a private school with qualified and motivated teachers, LP5 stated, 'In my area, the environment doesn't provide opportunities to develop skills'.

It is perhaps unsurprising that under these conditions the transition from MT to English as the MoI was considered to be tremendously difficult. As T6 explained, 'If a typical English classroom, in a multilingual context, doesn't operate in English but in Tigrinya, then we have a real problem'. In other words, if ELE in elementary school does not prepare students for the use of English as the MoI, the students face an uphill struggle throughout their educational career. In addition to the imbalanced teaching of language skills, however, the findings suggest that the contrary attitudes of teachers towards the multilingual repertoires of the students also hampers the development of English proficiency.

Whereas some of the high-performing students recognized that their first language (L1) had a facilitative role in their successful English language acquisition, this perspective was not shared by all. One trilingual student bluntly stated, 'I doubt the saying that L1 can facilitate acquiring L2…if that is the case, everybody here should talk English fluently'. Several students and teachers referred to the MT as an interference, interfering with students' pronunciation, grammar, reading and writing and negatively affecting their motivation to learn English. Many participants observed that for L1 literacy to have a facilitating role in learning English, MT education should first be strengthened suggesting that it was the conditions of MT education that was the reason for the under-valued potential of the MT in ELE.

The findings have outlined four distinct perspectives: systemic, teacher, student and linguistic conditions that contribute to the formation of the ELE ecosystem. Despite the multilingual mosaic of Eritrea and familiarity with the use of English as an additional language in their localized academic practices, the findings reported here suggest that ELE in Eritrea does not constitute a community of practice into which students are successfully socialised. The interaction between the different conditions is the focus of the discussion.
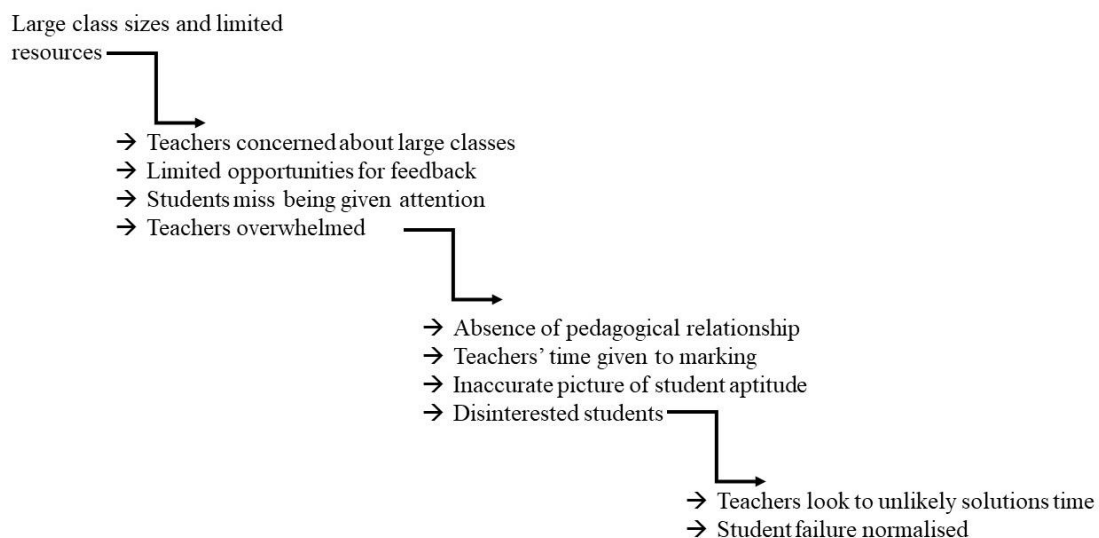
5 Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore how the conditions of ELE in Eritrea interrelate to form the ELE ecosystem, and to gain insight into what challenges the development of English language learners and learning within this context. In response to the first research question, what kinds of conditions are outlined in the college student and teacher interviews? The four different entry points highlight affective, instructional, studying and linguistic conditions. The affective conditions refer to the experience of ELE and the feelings promoted in Eritrean ELE classrooms (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2013). The didactic conditions outline the ways in which language is taught in ELE, whereas the learning conditions outline the ways in which students are expected to participate. The linguistic conditions address the way in which language and language learning is perceived and promoted in ELE. These conditions are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Summarising the challenging conditions of ELE ecosystem in Eritrea.

Affective conditions	Didactic conditions	Study conditions	Linguistic conditions
▪ Little freedom for teachers or learners ▪ High risk of shame and humiliation ▪ Pacifying & boring ▪ Contrary – to succeed in the classroom is not the same as succeeding to teach or learn the language ▪ Diminishing motivation ▪ Minimal faith in provision or use of resources ▪ Absence of pedagogical relationships	▪ Formal instruction in large classes ▪ Restricted methodological choices ▪ Minimal negotiation or feedback ▪ Dictated schedule ▪ Assigned material ▪ Evaluated activity ▪ Lack of training and language proficiency ▪ Exam-focused ▪ Student agency under utilised	▪ Limited input ▪ Few opportunities for practice ▪ Inauthentic textbook-based (in school), haphazard materials (in college) ▪ Focus on eradication of errors and passing exams ▪ Standardized performance exclusive rather than inclusive ▪ Contrary supervision	▪ MT a contested resource ▪ Focus on form, not meaning ▪ Awareness-raising activities negatively oriented ▪ Imbalanced handling of four skills with emphasis on grammatical accuracy ▪ Idealised linguistic performance compared with native English standards

One example of the interrelatedness of the conditions is the knock-on effect regarding the large class sizes and limited resources, as illustrated in Figure 3. In this example, the successive steps exacerbate the negative scenario adding further layers of frustration and disappointment (Asfaha, 2009; Rena, 2007). In the final step illustrated here, the teachers can seek solutions in the introduction of information technology, but student failure has already become an (almost) inevitable conclusion. This knock-on effect means that educators face greater uphill struggles when introducing change, and for under-qualified teachers reforming the ELE ecosystem may seem to be beyond their capacity. These struggles in effect inhibit any effort to attempt to change.

Large class sizes and limited resources

→ Teachers concerned about large classes
→ Limited opportunities for feedback
→ Students miss being given attention
→ Teachers overwhelmed

→ Absence of pedagogical relationship
→ Teachers' time given to marking
→ Inaccurate picture of student aptitude
→ Disinterested students

→ Teachers look to unlikely solutions time
→ Student failure normalised

Figure 3. The knock-on effect of large class sizes and limited resources

Another challenging feature of the ELE ecosystem is the perceived low English proficiency of students. This feature is reinforced by the negative perception students have of themselves as students of English, of their teachers and of studying English, as well as the teachers' negative perception of the students, their limited pedagogical repertoire and limited language capacity. These negative perceptions reinforce one another and create a negative cycle of low expectation and minimal investment. The knock-on and self-reinforcing dynamics are also present in the mismatch between policy and practice. According to the curriculum, teachers should prepare students to develop their English language proficiency, yet minimal teacher preparation leading to limited pedagogical competence in overcrowded classrooms and a high stakes exam-based system unsurprisingly leads to the failure of teachers to provide adequate input, opportunity for practice or balance in the development of language skills, resulting in disillusioned students (Glew, 1998). As with the seed example in the introduction, without a nourishing environment, the initial flourishing of students quickly wilts and seems difficult to revive. Van Lier (2004) highlights emergence as a characteristic feature of an ecosystem. Unfortunately, within the Eritrean ELE ecosystem, emergence appears to be negative, rather than positive or creative, manifestation of the individual-environment relationship.

The worst-case scenario is when a disjuncture is created within the ecosystem, that is, when students feel, and in effect are, lost. The findings suggest a number of reasons why students are lost within ELE. In addition to the negative perceptions outlined earlier, the view that use of the MT is compensation for inadequacy rather than as a bridge to attachment, the use of English as the MoI across the curriculum and the inability of teachers to form pedagogical safety nets all contribute to the gradual diminishment of students as participants in ELE, as illustrated in Figure 4.
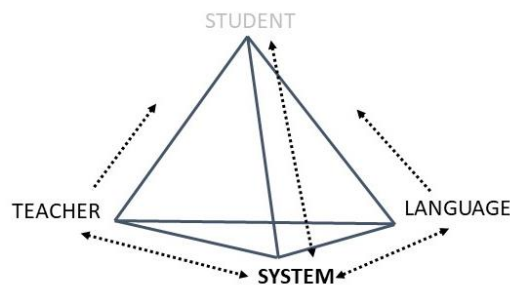

Figure 4. Losing sight of students in ELE

In this example, the imbalance between the four points is even clearer. The didactic and linguistic conditions are dominated by the system, and the student cannot benefit from the presence of either, as illustrated with the shortened arrows. In this scenario, the students are almost irrelevant to the day-to-day activities of ELE, yet the weight of the system still bears down on students. Establishing MTE as the policy in elementary education was intended to promote students' socio-linguistic identity and to contribute to their educational trajectory (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). The findings from this study, however, highlight the importance of ensuring this purposeful, ideological space is open to the students and a stable educational community is able to harness the linguistic potential of multilingual students. While recent research indicates that it is possible to use

multiple languages as the medium of instruction in a single school revealing appreciation for the complexities of diversity (Asfaha, 2020); this study suggests that the language learning pathways of Eritrean students meander and fail to enrich the language learning experiences of Eritrean students.

6 Conclusion

Despite the purposive sampling and extensive dataset underpinning this study, it is nevertheless limited in its scope as the sample size cannot fully represent student and teacher populations. It is also important to note that interview data is not a factual report, but rather a subjective account, of participants' experiences (Friedman, 2021). These experiences can only offer what the participants are willing to reveal about their perceptions of events and opinions that can be subjective and change over time due to circumstances (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Although the participants were aware of the interviewer's interest in ELE and motivation for the study, the candid and varied accounts that the participants shared suggests that the English language has played, and continues to play, a significant role in their educational experiences highlighting the value of interviews to explore 'the lived world from the perspective of the participants involved' (Richards, 2009, p. 187) and to ascertain different perspectives (Curtis & Anderson, 2021).

It is hoped that these findings will shed light on the current conditions of ELE in Eritrea and the need to recognize the disjointedness between language policies and language practices. The findings highlight the need to be aware of the ideological, sociocultural, pedagogical and linguistic identities of local languages to bear successful learning outcomes in EME. In this study the target language was too often considered an obligation rather than a negotiation or input, as commonly described in language education research (e.g., Fisher, 1995). Rather than a positive form of language socialization into their immediate or an international community (Friedman, 2021), ELE in Eritrea too often seems to socialize students out of their immediate environment with little affirmation from a sense of belonging to an international community. By mapping the conditions of Eritrean ELE, it is easier to discern how the conditions of ELE inform language development (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2013; Spolsky & Sung, 2015; Oxford, 2016) and to define what learning is within this ecosystem (van Lier, 2004) and to identify areas for development.

Students, and teachers, have no choice but to teach/learn English nor do they have much choice in how to teach/study. Within this environment, learning is conforming to the expectations placed upon students, whereas teaching is controlling – as well as being controlled. Arguably, the limited physical and pedagogical space given to teachers and students could still be used creatively. Teachers could establish peer group mentoring groups, for example, and create different types of student roles even in large classrooms. Students could also use the language in their free time, rather than depend on the classroom conditions, but the control and pressure of the system exerted in the immediate ELE environment seems to inhibit the potential agency of participants. More could be done to create spaces for use of English language in the college campus where students are boarding and living in tight communities. Enhancing access to English language (social) media and literature could provide opportunities to develop proficiency through authentic activities.

This inhibition is also evident in the negative perception of the multilingual repertoires of English language teachers and students. Within this environment, the different MTs are only unofficially present, often considered an interference rather than an affordance, despite the forward-looking MT policy in elementary school (Asfaha & Sjaak, 2011). This negative perception carries over into the metalinguistic considerations of this environment. Even though multilingual learners often have greater metalinguistic awareness that can serve them well when learning another language (Cummins, 2017), the test-driven focus on grammatical accuracy leaves little room for more expansive explorations of language as a concept or languages as resources for further development. More research is needed on the affordances of translanguaging (Garciá et al., 2017) and the creative solutions of low-cost technologies (Walsh et al., 2011), as highlighted by T6.

This study indicates that a significant amount of work is required to re-balance and reform, even transform, Eritrean ELE in order to create a positive ELE that maximises rather than inhibits the potential of Eritrean students and teachers. Eritrea is not alone in facing significant challenges when seeking to redress this balance (e.g. Qorro, 2006; Nel & Müller, 2010; Norro, 2022) and as the contributions from the participants' highlight, students and teachers are aware of many of these challenges and students can succeed despite the challenges of the ELE ecosystem to-date. Dewey (1933, 1938) explained that a significant step in being able to reform and improve habitual ways of being involves becoming aware of what we seek to change and why we seek change. These first steps have been taken, the next steps can now be made.

Disclosure statement

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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