

International Journal  
of

**MULTILINGUAL  
EDUCATION**

International Journal of  
**MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION**

**ISSN: (Print)** ISSN 1987-9601

**(Online)** E ISSN 1512-3146

**Journal homepage:** <http://multilingualeducation.org/>

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**Challenges and Practices in Teaching and  
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Two Selected High Schools in Kafa Zone  
Bonga Town, Ethiopia**

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To cite this article: Atirse Awago Atumo (2026), Challenges and Practices in Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language: Two Selected High Schools in Kafa Zone Bonga Town, Ethiopia:

International Journal of Multilingual Education, volume 27, issue 1, pp. 97-119.

To link to this article:

<https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2026.11580>

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## Challenges and Practices in Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language: Two Selected High Schools in Kafa Zone Bonga Town, Ethiopia

### ABSTRACT

This research investigated the challenges and practices related to teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Kafa Zone, Bonga town, Ethiopia. The study involved 120 students from two randomly selected high schools (60 from each), employing a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through students' questionnaire, teachers' interview, and classroom observations. The findings revealed major barriers, which including a main dependence on the mother tongue in the classroom, insufficient exposure to English practice, and limited students' engagement in speaking activities. The data from questionnaire highlighted issues, such as ineffective teaching methods and a lack of motivation among students. Moreover, teachers' dependence on translation and lecture-based instruction limited active learning approach in the EFL classroom. The implications recommend that the need for enhanced teacher training, improved instructional strategies, and a more supportive learning setting to enhance English language skills. Finally, the investigation underlines the need for systematic changes in English language education to better equip students for effective communication in a globalization context

**Keywords:** *English proficiency, mother tongue interference, student motivation, teaching methods, instructional challenges.*

### Introduction

Nowadays, the English language is an important language for communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in language teaching classrooms. Its significance is particularly pronounced in developing countries such as Ethiopia, which seek to establish diplomatic, economic, educational, and cultural relationships with more developed nations. Concerning this, Crystal (2009) explains that English serves as an international lingua franca, particularly in fields such as politics, commerce, industry, and education. In light of this, many people around the globe are motivated to improve their English language skills. Mandefro et al. (2016) suggest that the teaching and learning of the English language are closely associated with global social and political developments.

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In the Ethiopian context, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language began relatively recently compared to a few other African countries. Its introduction was closely connected to the beginning of modern education during the reign of Emperor Menelik II.

Gerencheal and Mishra (2019) explain that English has been used as a medium of instruction since the early 20th century, when Ethiopia began establishing formal education systems to foster international engagement. According to Fasika (2014), modern education in Ethiopia officially began in 1908, and foreign languages such as English, Italian, and French were introduced as part of that development.

English is currently taught as a second or foreign language in Ethiopia from primary school through higher education. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia prioritizes equitable, relevant, and quality education and has allocated considerable resources toward achieving this goal (MoE, 2009). According to the 1994 Education and Training Policy, English is introduced as a subject beginning in Grade 1 and becomes the medium of instruction from Grade 5 onward, continuing through secondary and tertiary education (Gerencheal & Mishra, 2019). Although mother-tongue instruction is encouraged during the early primary grades, English remains central to students' academic advancement at higher levels of education.

Despite these policy efforts, many Ethiopian students struggle to develop adequate English language proficiency. English is often perceived as a difficult subject, which in turn affects students' motivation and engagement. This perception negatively influences their academic performance and limits their ability to communicate effectively in English both inside and outside the classroom. These challenges have raised concerns among educators, school leaders, and policymakers.

Educational institutions play a key role in preparing learners to address the social, economic, and cultural challenges of the 21st century. In many African countries, English functions as the primary language of instruction and a medium of international communication. Eshetie (2010) highlights the significant role of English in various sectors, including politics, trade, technology, tourism, education, research, and the media. However, despite its prominence, a persistent gap remains between the increasing demand for English proficiency and students' actual performance.

The literature identifies several barriers to effective English language teaching and learning. For instance, Bachore (2015) attributes students' poor performance in English to factors such as low teacher motivation, insufficient subject-matter mastery, large class sizes, a lack of teaching materials, and student discipline problems. Similarly, Aweke and Hussen (2019) highlight weaknesses in English instruction at the foundational level, along with limitations in the curriculum and broader systemic challenges.

Agajie's (2020) investigation of English-medium instruction at the college level has provided valuable insights; however, there remains a need for focused research at the secondary school level. In particular, few studies have examined how English is taught and practiced within the classroom context of Ethiopian secondary schools. Moreover, research conducted in different educational or cultural contexts, such as Ali and Jaff's (2014) study at the Muslim University of Morogoro, cannot be directly applied to settings like Bonga Town in the Kafa Zone of Ethiopia, where linguistic, pedagogical, and infrastructural conditions differ significantly.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the key challenges and instructional practices involved in the teaching and learning of English language skills in two selected secondary schools in the Kafa Zone. It aims to examine how English is used by teachers and students in classroom settings and to identify contextual factors that may hinder effective language acquisition. Understanding these factors is essential for improving instructional quality and supporting students' academic success. Hence, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How frequently do teachers and students use English during classroom teaching and learning activities?
2. What are the main challenges that limit the consistent teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in the selected high schools?
3. To what extent do teachers use English effectively as a medium of instruction in the classroom?

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***The Importance of Learning English***

English has become the contemporary lingua franca, driven by the increasing demand for global communication and information exchange. Approximately 400 million people speak English as their native language, another 400 million use it as a second language, and about 800 million use it as a foreign language (Kgsupport.com). Bachore (2015) noted that English is the preferred language in many African countries. Moreover, around 70% of internet content is in English, highlighting its importance in connecting people worldwide. Aizawa et al. (2023) further emphasize that proficiency in English creates opportunities for success in higher education, employment, international travel, and engagement with global culture.

In Ethiopia, English plays several crucial roles, particularly in the education sector. Bachore (2015) noted that English has long served as the medium of instruction from Grade 9 onwards. However, regional policies have varied, with some regions adopting English as the medium of instruction beginning in Grade 5, while others introduced it in Grade 7 or Grade 9 in the previous

education curriculum (Heugh et al., 2006, as cited in Bachore, 2015). Beyond the education sector, English is also essential for accessing information from key government institutions, including the Ministry of Education. In response to ongoing concerns about educational quality, the Ethiopian government appointed a group of experts to evaluate the national curriculum and propose reforms. As a result, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018–2030) introduced significant changes: English is now taught as a subject beginning in Grade 1 and used as the medium of instruction starting in Grade 7 or Grade 8, depending on the regional context (MoE, 2023).

### ***English Language Learning and Teaching Strategies***

Language learning strategies are the conscious processes that learners use to enhance their language acquisition. Wu (2013) emphasizes that effective strategies are vital for developing communicative ability in a second language. Research shows that successful learners employ a wider variety of effective strategies compared to their less successful peers (Rubin, 1975). Oxford (1990) categorized these strategies into six groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). In this regard, Andrew (2007) suggests that successful language learning involves developing a personalized approach and fully participating in learning activities. Learners should remain open-minded and accepting of the target language while gaining the necessary technical knowledge to address linguistic challenges. They are encouraged to experiment with and plan strategies that enhance their understanding of language systems, continually seek meaning in what they learn, and actively use the language in authentic communication. In addition, effective learners regularly monitor their own language use, willingly practice, and cultivate the ability to think directly in the target language, all of which contribute to more efficient language acquisition and greater communicative competence.

Teachers, like learners, possess diverse teaching styles. Hadfield and Hadfield (2008) note that some teachers are methodical planners, while others adopt a more flexible approach to instruction. An effective teacher plays a significant role in facilitating learning, from lesson design to classroom management. Cora and Paul (2006) describe effective teachers as those who understand learners' needs, provide constructive feedback, and create an enriching learning environment.

### ***Challenges in Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)***

Identifying the challenges faced by students and teachers is crucial for improving English language education. A significant challenge for learners is the lack of an immersive language environment. Smith (2013) described challenges such as dealing with a new language and adapting to a new learning context. Additionally, the quality of English language textbooks in Ethiopia is often inadequate, failing

to provide sufficient practice opportunities (Akbari, 2015). Issues such as outdated content and a lack of engaging tasks hinder effective learning before curriculum reform had been done.

Understanding various teaching methods is crucial for addressing challenges in English language education. The grammar-translation method emphasizes grammar rules and translation, while the direct method focuses on natural language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The audio-lingual method prioritizes aural and oral skills (Brown, 2007), and communicative language teaching aims to enhance learners' communicative competence through interactive activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2007).

However, applying these methods effectively can be challenging. A multifaceted approach is necessary to improve students' English language skills, integrating diverse methods to meet different learning needs. For foundational knowledge, the grammar-translation method can be useful, while direct and audio-lingual methods offer immersive experiences. Communicative language teaching fosters interaction among students, making learning more dynamic. Encouraging active participation through group discussions, role-plays, and collaborative projects promotes engagement and practical language use. Furthermore, incorporating real-life contexts, media, and technology enhances relevance and enjoyment in learning. Providing constructive feedback, promoting extensive reading, and creating a positive, risk-free environment are essential for building students' confidence and competence. Tailoring instruction to individual needs ensures that all learners can progress effectively, overcoming the inherent challenges of diverse teaching methods.

## **Research Methods**

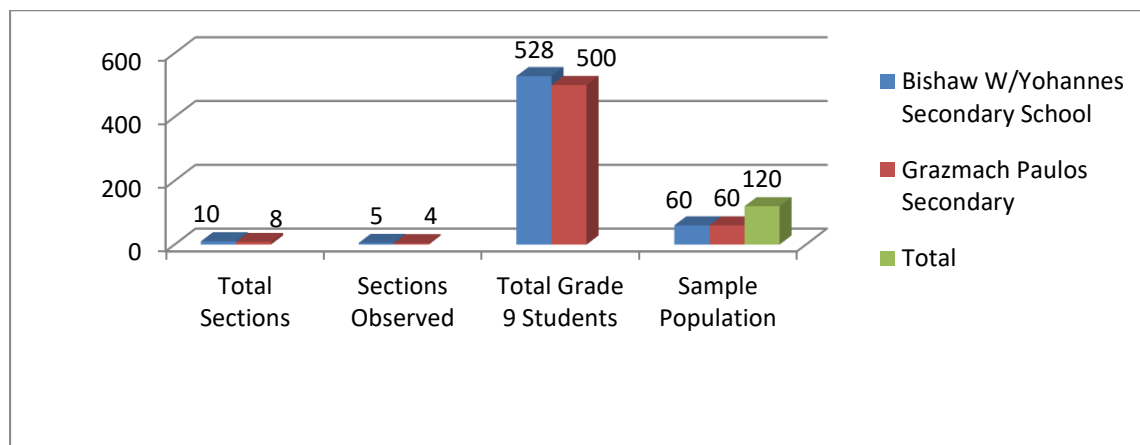
This study explored practices and challenges in teaching and learning the English language using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative research. The researcher used a descriptive research design, as noted by Kumar (2015) and Best and Khan (2006), which should align with study objectives and provide a detailed analysis of existing situations. The research involved a questionnaire for students to gather firsthand data on learning strategies, challenges, and teacher support, as well as teacher interviews focusing on instructional techniques and the content of the textbook. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to assess teaching strategies and the challenges faced by both students and teachers.

## ***Sampling Techniques***

The study involved selecting participants from two government high schools in Bonga Town, focusing on both students and teachers. For the student sample, a probability sampling technique was employed,

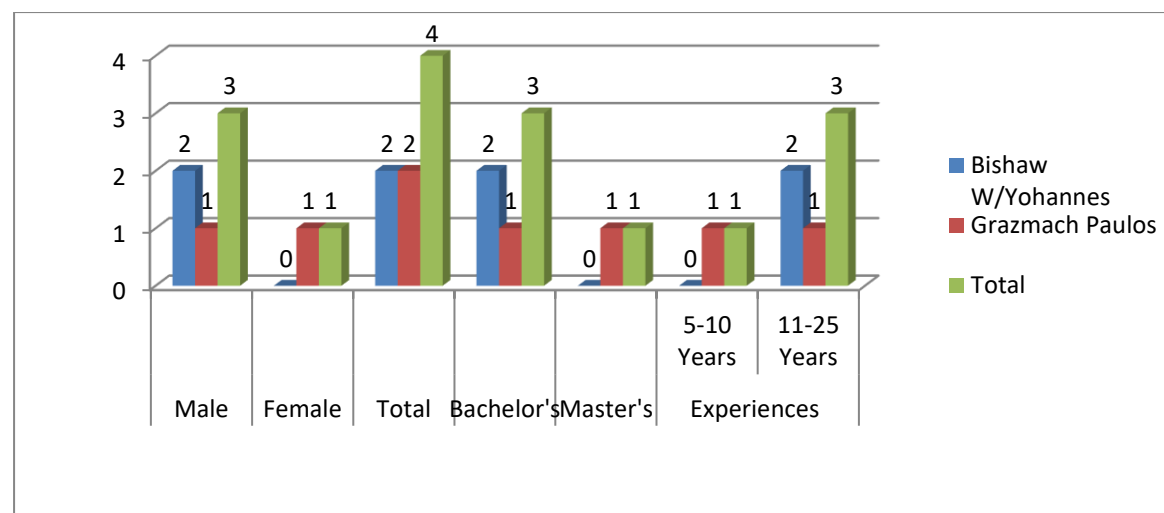
specifically simple random sampling, to select 120 Grade 9 students. Of these, 60 students were selected from Bishaw W/Yohannes School and 60 from Grazmach Paulos Secondary School, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Student Participants**



A purposive sampling method was employed to select 50% of grade 9 English instructors, ensuring the inclusion of those with varied educational backgrounds and teaching experiences from both schools. A total of 4 teachers participated, with 3 (75%) being male and 1 (25%) female. Among them, 2 (50%) held master's degrees, while the other 2 had bachelor's degrees. Their teaching experience varied, with 1 teacher having 10 years and the other 3 between 11 and 25 years, providing a rich perspective on the teaching of English in this context as shown in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Teachers' Demography**



**Data Collection Instruments**

To gather comprehensive data on the challenges faced by teachers and students in learning English,

three data collection tools were utilized: questionnaires, classroom observations, and teachers' interviews. The students' questionnaire focused on techniques, difficulties, and teaching methodologies, including both open-ended and closed-ended questions organized into three sections, with instructions in Amharic for clarity. 4 out of 8 grade 9 English teachers participated in interviews, providing insights into students' language proficiency, motivation, and challenges; these interviews were conducted in English and lasted 20 to 30 minutes, with data recorded for accuracy. Classroom observations supplemented this data by allowing the researcher to witness teaching and learning dynamics, conducted in one classes from Bishaw W/Yohannes and two from Grazmach Paulos, thus offering a deeper understanding of classroom interactions and practices.

### ***The Validity and Reliability of the Instruments***

Validity and reliability are essential aspects of any research instrument, ensuring that results are accurate and consistent (Jain & Angural, 2017). This section discusses the methods used to assess the validity and reliability of the instruments employed in the study.

#### ***Validity of the Instruments***

The face validity and content validity of the instruments were examined by experienced English instructors from Bonga College of Education. They reviewed the questionnaires to ensure that the content was aligned with the study's objectives. Feedback from these experts led to adjustments in the length and the overall structure of the instruments.

#### ***Reliability of the Reading Test***

To ensure the reliability of the attitude questionnaires, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used. Cronbach's Alpha statistical measure assesses the internal consistency of a set of items in a questionnaire, indicating how well the items measure the same construct (Jain & Angural, 2017). Accordingly, the reliability of survey questionnaires was measured and displayed in the table below:

**Table 1: Reliability statistics for challenges and language practice in the classroom**

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
EFL Classroom Challenges	0.83	13
Use of English Language	0.85	12

### Data Analysis

The data collected through the students' questionnaire, classroom observations, and teachers' interviews were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using tables that indicated the mean and standard deviation using SPSS version 20. In contrast, the qualitative data obtained from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed thematically to provide deeper insights.

### Research Findings

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the students' questionnaire, classroom observations, and teachers' interviews. To effectively convey the quantitative data, tables and figures are utilized, as they provide a clear and concise way to present extensive information (Kumar, 2015). The analysis begins with an examination of the students' questionnaire, focusing on their preferences for different language skills, illustrated through relevant figures to highlight the findings.

#### Results of the Student Preferences for Various Skills

Students' preferences for English language skills were surveyed to determine the extent to which they give equal importance to the four basic skills of English language. The results are presented in the following Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Student preferences for different skills.

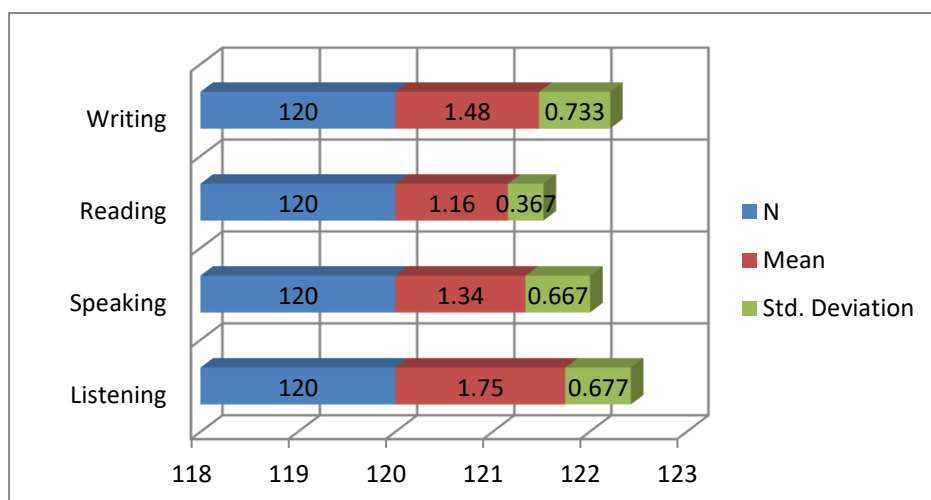


Figure 3 shows that students generally have a dislike for all English language skills, with reading being the least favored (mean = 1.16), indicating strong consensus on this dislike. Listening

(mean = 1.75) is the most preferred skill, but still reflects a moderate level of dislike. Speaking (mean = 1.34) also shows a relatively low preference, while writing (mean = 1.48) reveals a moderate dislike, with more varied opinions among students. Overall, the data suggests that students lack enthusiasm for these skills, particularly reading, which they find least appealing.

**Table 2: Results of Teachers and Students use of English Language**

Items	Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The English teacher uses English exclusively during lessons.	120	1.82	0.898
2	The teacher uses mother tongue when students struggle to understand concepts.	120	2.03	0.930
3	The teacher predominantly speaks in the mother tongue (Amharic/others).	120	2.33	1.048
4	The teacher employs a lecture method for teaching English skills.	120	2.02	0.991
5	The teacher facilitates group discussions.	120	1.83	0.895
6	The teacher allows students to ask and answer questions in English.	120	2.04	0.771
7	The teacher encourages students to speak in English.	120	1.87	0.934
8	The teacher creates a comfortable environment for practicing English.	120	2.10	1.024
9	The teacher teaches English through translation (L2-L1).	120	2.10	1.024
10	The teacher uses pair and group work in teaching English skills.	120	1.98	0.840
11	Students are motivated to use English in class.	120	2.40	0.938
12	Students participate in group discussions and pair work.	120	2.37	0.925

The data in Table 2 present the mean and standard deviation values of teachers' and students' classroom practices regarding the use of English in teaching and learning. The overall mean scores, ranging between 1.82 and 2.40 on a four-point scale (1 = Always, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Never), indicate that most of the observed practices occur only sometimes rather than consistently. Teachers were found to sometimes use English exclusively during lessons (M = 1.82, SD = 0.898) and to occasionally facilitate group discussions (M = 1.83, SD = 0.895) and encourage students to speak in English (M = 1.87, SD = 0.934). However, the relatively higher means for using the mother tongue (M = 2.03) and teaching through translation (M = 2.10) suggest that L1 still plays a significant role in classroom interaction.

Students' active involvement was also limited, as shown by moderate mean values for motivation (M = 2.40) and participation in group or pair work (M = 2.37). These results imply that, while English is used to some extent, both teachers and students tend to rely on the mother tongue, and communicative, learner-centered activities are not regularly practiced. The findings highlight the need for greater emphasis on interactive and English-only classroom strategies to enhance students' language proficiency and confidence in using English.

**Table 3: Challenges faced by Teachers and Students in EFL Classroom**

Items	Statement	N	Mean	StD Deviation
1	Mother tongue impacts English learning.	120	3.81	1.132
2	Lack of group/pair work affects learning.	120	3.59	1.452
3	Teacher doesn't use English consistently.	120	2.83	1.471
4	Students struggle with English background issues.	120	3.82	1.207
5	Lack of motivation to speak English.	120	2.24	1.290
6	Absence of English textbooks.	120	2.84	1.550
7	Uncomfortable seating arrangement.	120	2.68	1.409
8	1 to 5 seating limits individual participation.	120	3.13	1.455
9	Frequent use of mother tongue by the teacher.	120	3.28	1.328
10	Students fear speaking English with peers.	120	3.70	1.351
11	1 to 5 leaders dominate group presentations.	120	3.57	1.430
12	Perception of English as difficult.	120	3.00	1.619
13	Limited encouragement to use English outside class.	120	2.95	1.144

The data in Table 3 present the main challenges encountered by both teachers and students in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The mean values, which range from 2.24 to 3.82 on a four-point scale, indicate that several challenges are perceived as frequent or highly influential. The highest mean scores were recorded for *students' weak English background* ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.207$ ) and *the influence of the mother tongue on English learning* ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.132$ ), revealing that students' prior language knowledge and heavy reliance on their first language are among the most critical obstacles to effective English learning. Similarly, *students' fear of speaking English with peers* ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.351$ ) and *the lack of group or pair work* ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.452$ ) show that classroom interaction is hindered by low confidence and limited communicative opportunities. Moderate challenges were associated with *teacher inconsistency in using English* ( $M = 2.83$ ) and *the absence of English textbooks* ( $M = 2.84$ ), suggesting gaps in teaching resources and classroom language policy. Seating-related issues, such as *uncomfortable arrangements* ( $M = 2.68$ ) and *the dominance of 1-to-5 group leaders* ( $M = 3.57$ ), further restrict student participation. Meanwhile, the relatively lower mean for *lack of motivation to speak English* ( $M = 2.24$ ) indicates that although students recognize the value of English, their engagement is limited by contextual and structural factors.

Overall, the findings imply that both linguistic and environmental factors, especially mother-tongue interference, inadequate communicative practice, and insufficient resources, significantly constrain the teaching and learning of English in the observed high schools. Strengthening English-only classroom policies, improving seating and resource availability, and fostering a supportive atmosphere for oral practice are therefore essential to improve EFL outcomes in this context.

### ***The Result of Open-Ended Item of Students' Questionnaire***

The qualitative findings from the open-ended items closely support and reinforce the quantitative results from the closed-ended questionnaire and classroom observations. Students' comments highlight limited exposure to English, with many reporting frequent use of their mother tongue both inside and outside the classroom. This perception aligns with the quantitative findings, where high mean scores were recorded for "*Mother tongue impacts English learning*" (M = 3.81) and "*Frequent use of mother tongue by the teacher*" (M = 3.28), confirming that first language interference remains a major challenge. Similarly, students' concern about lack of teacher encouragement and institutional support ("There is not enough encouragement from teachers and the school") is consistent with the mean score for "*Limited encouragement to use English outside class*" (M = 2.95) and "*Lack of motivation to speak English*" (M = 2.24). These results suggest that insufficient motivational and pedagogical support reduces students' willingness to practice English.

Furthermore, the complaint that teachers rely heavily on lecture-based instruction ("Teachers spend too much time lecturing instead of helping us practice") triangulates with the quantitative data indicating that teachers *sometimes* use the lecture method (M = 2.02) and *rarely* facilitate pair or group work (M = 1.98). This supports the conclusion that English teaching in the observed schools remains largely teacher-centered, offering limited opportunities for communicative practice. In addition, students' remarks about an ineffective English club reflect the broader issue of minimal English use beyond the classroom, echoing the quantitative finding that *students are only sometimes motivated to use English in class* (M = 2.40). Overall, the convergence of both data types demonstrates that the main obstacles to effective EFL learning in the study schools are insufficient English exposure, lack of interactive teaching methods, weak extracurricular support, and heavy reliance on the mother tongue.

### ***Results of Classroom Observation***

This classroom observation report presents findings from three observation sessions conducted for three English language teachers across two schools (one section from Grazmach and two sections from Bishaw schools). The purpose was to assess the extent to which teachers implemented recommended strategies, such as the use of English as the medium of instruction, classroom interaction techniques, student engagement practices, etc. Hence, nine observations (three observations per section) were conducted across two schools, as shown in Table 4 below:

**Table 4: Frequency of classroom observation**

No.	How often teachers and students perform the following activities in classroom b/n 40 minutes range?		Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	The teacher uses classroom language	F	3	4	2	-
		%	34	44	22	-
2	The teacher uses group and pair works	F	-	3	3	3
		%	-	34	33	33
3	The teacher motivates students to use English in classroom while teaching	F	2	1	2	4
		%	22	11	22	44
4	The teacher uses English the whole period	F	3	6	-	-
		%	34	66	-	-
5	The teacher initiates students to ask and answer questions in English	F	-	2	4	3
		%	-	22	44	34
6	The teacher gives a chance students to present their group and pair works in English	F	1	2	2	4
		%	11	22	22	45
7	The classroom discipline is maintained	F	-	3	4	2
		%	-	34	44	22
8	Students ask questions in English	F	-	-	5	4
		%	-	-	56	44
9	All students have English text book	F	-	-	6	3
		%	-	-	66	34
10	Students listen teacher's talk	F	-	4	3	2
		%	-	44	34	22
11	Teacher gives examples before students do the activities	F	2	4	3	-
		%	22	44	34	-
12	The teacher encourages students during their attempt	F	-	5	3	1
		%	-	56	33	11

As Table 4 above shows, the classroom observation conducted in two schools across three sections and observed three times each, intended to evaluate how English teachers and students use classroom English and engage in communicative practices during 40-minute lessons. The results revealed that teachers' use of classroom English was inconsistent. While 34% of the teachers always used English, 44% used it sometimes, and 22% rarely used it. Similarly, although some teachers (34%) used English throughout the lesson, most (66%) did so only occasionally. Group and pair work were minimally practiced, with only a third of the teachers sometimes organizing them, another third rarely doing so, and the rest never using them. This indicates a preference for teacher-centered approaches such as the lecture method. Furthermore, only a few teachers (22%) consistently motivated students to use English, while 44% never did so. Teachers also rarely initiated students to ask and answer questions in English or allowed them to present their group and pair work in English, suggesting limited opportunities for students to develop communicative competence.

Students' participation and engagement were also found to be low. More than half of the students (56%) rarely asked or answered questions in English, and 44% never did. A large proportion of students (66%) did not bring or use English textbooks during lessons, and many were not attentive to teachers' instruction. Although some teachers (44%) sometimes gave examples before students' activities and 56% occasionally encouraged students' attempts, consistent support and encouragement were lacking. Classroom discipline was maintained to some extent, but not uniformly, as only 34% of teachers always managed it well. Overall, the findings show that both teachers and students demonstrated weak use of English and limited engagement in communicative classroom practices. Teaching was largely traditional, teacher-dominated, and lacked sufficient student interaction, motivation, and practice opportunities, highlighting the need for a shift toward more interactive and student-centered English language teaching approaches.

During the classroom observation, several issues were noted regarding both students and teachers based on open-ended items. The qualitative findings derived from the observer's open-ended notes strongly reinforce and expand upon the quantitative results from the classroom observation checklist. Both data sources consistently demonstrate that teachers' use of English in the classroom is limited and inconsistent. The observed instances where teachers made grammatical and structural errors such as "*Yesterday, we are discussed*" or "*Now we have discuss about...*" confirm the quantitative finding that only 34% of teachers always used English, while 44% did so only sometimes. This inconsistency in language use aligns with the survey results indicating that *teachers do not use English effectively as a medium of instruction* ( $M = 2.04$ ) and *frequently rely on translation* ( $M = 2.10$ ). Similarly, teachers' reliance on mother-tongue explanations, as observed when more than eight consecutive words were translated into Amharic, directly corresponds with the high mean score for "*Mother tongue impacts English learning*" ( $M = 3.81$ ).

Moreover, issues such as narrow classroom space, overcrowding, and poor seating arrangements triangulate with the quantitative findings that *uncomfortable seating* ( $M = 2.68$ ) and *1-to-5 grouping limitations* ( $M = 3.13$ ) hinder active participation. The observation that 60–70% of students did not bring textbooks further supports the challenge identified in the survey data regarding *absence of English textbooks* ( $M = 2.84$ ). In addition, the lack of group and pair work noted in most observed classes is consistent with both the closed-ended classroom observation results, where only about a third of teachers sometimes organized pair or group activities, and the students' questionnaire responses showing low engagement in collaborative tasks. The behavioral issues observed, including students ignoring teachers' instructions, inattentiveness, and poor classroom management, confirm the quantitative findings that classroom discipline and student motivation were only maintained *sometimes*

(34–44%). Finally, instances of inappropriate teacher language and poor interactional techniques, such as overuse of filler expressions (“isn’t it”) or derogatory remarks, reveal deep-rooted professional and pedagogical challenges that cannot be captured through numeric data alone.

Overall, the triangulated evidence from quantitative and qualitative sources clearly indicates that both structural and pedagogical factors, such as large class sizes, insufficient teacher proficiency, limited resources, and reliance on translation, severely restrict effective English language teaching and learning. These combined findings underscore the need for targeted professional development, improved classroom conditions, and stronger emphasis on communicative English practices to enhance EFL teaching quality in the studied schools.

### ***Results of the Teachers’ Interview***

The teachers’ interview data are organized under key themes that emerged from the research questions. Each theme includes relevant interview responses from four teachers, coded as T1, T2, T3, and T4 to maintain confidentiality and provide clarity for the reader.

#### *Theme 1: Students’ English Language Proficiency and Language Use during Instruction*

The interviews with teachers revealed that students’ proficiency in English is generally low, which significantly affects their participation in classroom activities. Teacher 1 (T1) stated, “*The students’ English proficiency is very poor. They always ask me to translate everything into Amharic. They don’t understand unless I explain in their mother tongue.*” Teacher 2 (T2) highlighted the challenge of balancing curriculum coverage with language assessment: “*Most of the time I just try to finish the textbook because the content is too large. I don’t have time to assess their proficiency deeply. I know they struggle, but I focus on covering the portion.*” Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized students’ reluctance to speak in English, noting, “*My students prefer writing and grammar tasks. They completely avoid speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes. When they speak, other students laugh at them.*” Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) pointed out the lack of exposure to English outside the classroom: “*Their language level is very low. They prefer speaking Amharic in class, and they lack exposure to English both at home and at school.*”

These responses collectively indicate that students’ low English proficiency, fear of making mistakes, reliance on the mother tongue, and limited exposure to English contribute to minimal participation and reduced practice of communicative skills during lessons.

#### *Theme 2: Students’ Participation, Motivation, and Attitudes toward English*

The interviews highlighted that students’ participation, motivation, and attitudes toward English were generally low. Teacher 1 (T1) observed, “*Only a few students show interest. Most of them are passive.*”

*They don't see English as important or useful.*" Teacher 2 (T2) noted the influence of students' educational background, stating, *"Some students come from rural areas where they didn't get a strong English foundation. They just play, talk, or disturb others in class."* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized students' perception of English as a difficult subject: *"Students think English is difficult. That's why they don't try. Even if I encourage them, only a few respond positively."* Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) reported challenges in motivating students: *"I try to motivate them, but many still feel shy or uninterested in participating. They avoid answering questions or speaking in English."*

These responses suggest that low motivation, negative attitudes, and limited interest in English hinder students' active engagement in classroom activities. The data indicate that both individual and contextual factors, such as prior educational exposure and perceived difficulty of English, contribute to minimal participation and reluctance to use English during lessons.

### *Theme 3: Classroom Discipline Issues*

The interviews revealed that classroom discipline is a significant challenge in the observed schools. Teacher 1 (T1) noted, *"Some students always disturb the class. They talk, throw things, or ignore instructions."* Teacher 2 (T2) highlighted the lack of preparation and obedience among students, stating, *"They don't bring their books or exercise books. They are not obedient and resist doing class work."* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized the limited number of disciplined students, observing, *"Very few students are disciplined. The majorities just act out or stay disengaged."* Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) reported, *"Discipline is a real problem, especially among students who are already struggling. They disrupt the learning environment."*

### *Theme 4: Availability of English Teaching Materials and Aids*

The interviews highlighted limitations in the availability and use of teaching materials and aids in English classrooms. Teacher 1 (T1) stated, *"We have textbooks, but that's it. There are no visual or audio aids to help students understand better."* Teacher 2 (T2) pointed out that the issue is not just the absence of aids but also teachers' limited use, saying, *"The problem isn't lack of aids, it's that most teachers don't prepare or use them."* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized the reliance on textbooks alone, noting, *"Teaching aids like pictures and audio are essential, but we don't use them. Teachers rely only on textbooks."* Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) observed, *"There are enough textbooks, but no supplementary materials. I think more training is needed on how to use teaching aids."*

### *Theme 5: Effectiveness and Appropriateness of the English Textbook*

The interviews revealed mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness and suitability of the English textbook used in the classrooms. Teacher 1 (T1) noted, *“The book has all the language skills, but some parts are too hard. The poems and some grammar sections are not suitable.”* Teacher 2 (T2) pointed out the challenge of its length, stating, *“The textbook is large and difficult to cover in one school year. Students get discouraged by the amount.”* Teacher 3 (T3) highlighted mismatches with students’ proficiency, saying, *“Some content doesn’t match the students’ level. They lose interest quickly.”* Teacher 4 (T4) emphasized the importance of adaptation, explaining, *“The book is helpful in general, but only if the teacher adapts it. Otherwise, it’s overwhelming.”*

### *Theme 6: Major Challenges Faced by Teachers and Students*

The interviews revealed several significant challenges affecting both teaching and learning of English in the selected schools. Teacher 1 (T1) stated, *“Students don’t want to bring their books. They won’t participate unless I use Amharic.”* Teacher 2 (T2) highlighted infrastructural and curriculum-related issues, explaining, *“The classroom is overcrowded and not suitable. The book is too repetitive and long.”* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized students’ low language proficiency and the lack of instructional aids, noting, *“Most students lack basic English skills. Without visuals or other aids, it’s hard to make them understand.”* Teacher 4 (T4) pointed out motivational challenges, saying, *“Students are not interested. They just copy homework and never try to learn seriously.”* These responses indicate that teachers face multiple obstacles, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching aids, and students’ lack of motivation and basic skills of English.

### *Theme 7: Suggested Solutions to Improve Teaching and Learning*

The interviews highlighted several strategies recommended by teachers to enhance the effectiveness of English teaching and learning. Teacher 1 (T1) emphasized student responsibility, stating, *“Students must become more responsible, bringing textbooks and doing the homework regularly.”* Teacher 2 (T2) focused on instructional methods, suggesting, *“Teachers should prepare teaching aids and try to make the lesson more interactive.”* Teacher 3 (T3) recommended professional development and curriculum adjustments, noting, *“We need training on teaching methods. Also, textbooks need to be revised to suit student levels.”* Teacher 4 (T4) proposed additional academic support and resources, stating, *“Tutorials would help weaker students. Also, more reading materials should be provided.”*

Overall, these suggestions indicate that improving EFL teaching and learning requires a combined effort: students need to take more responsibility for their learning, teachers should adopt interactive and well-supported instructional approaches, and schools should provide suitable resources,

training, and remedial support to address students' varied proficiency levels. Implementing these solutions could significantly enhance students' English competence and classroom engagement.

## **Discussion**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the challenges faced in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and the classroom practices employed in secondary schools in Kafa Zone, Bonga Town, Ethiopia. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires administered to both teachers and students. These instruments enabled the study to capture quantitative patterns, such as the frequency of mother-tongue use, as well as qualitative insights into teachers' and students' experiences and perceptions of EFL instruction.

The findings reveal a range of persistent challenges in teaching and learning English in the studied context. Despite the policy emphasis on English as a medium of instruction (MoE, 2018), students continue to underperform in core language skills, particularly reading and speaking, which are essential for both academic success and communicative competence. While these outcomes appear at the surface level as low student performance, they reflect deeper systemic and pedagogical issues. Limited access to quality teaching materials, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient opportunities for authentic language exposure may collectively constrain effective language learning. Similar patterns have been reported by Mihret et al. (2024), who found that EFL learners in Ethiopian higher education institutions face systemic challenges such as inadequate instructional resources and limited exposure to communicative environments. Bedilu and Degefu (2024) also emphasize that structural and resource-related barriers significantly affect teachers' ability to implement effective EFL pedagogy, suggesting that these problems begin earlier in the educational pipeline, particularly at the secondary school level.

One of the most prominent challenges identified in this study is the overreliance on the mother tongue during classroom instruction. The high mean score recorded for mother-tongue use indicates that teachers frequently switch to Amharic or other local languages rather than maintaining English as the primary language of communication. While this practice may help clarify complex concepts and maintain classroom control, excessive reliance on the mother tongue significantly reduces students' exposure to authentic English input, which is essential for language acquisition. From a pedagogical perspective, this phenomenon may reflect teachers' own linguistic insecurity or limited confidence in their English proficiency. Faltamo (2019) similarly reported that frequent use of local languages in Ethiopian secondary schools limits students' exposure to English, constraining both language

acquisition and communicative competence. Aron-Salvacion (2023) likewise found that both teachers and students encounter substantial challenges when shifting from local languages to English in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments, largely due to low language proficiency and limited institutional support.

The findings also indicate that teacher-centered instruction remains the dominant pedagogical approach in the observed classrooms. Interactive teaching strategies such as pair work, group discussions, and communicative tasks were rarely observed. This reliance on teacher-centered practices may stem from several underlying factors, including large class sizes, time constraints, and limited professional training in communicative language teaching (CLT). Kafale, Arficho, and Abera (2024) reported similar findings in Sidama Region, highlighting that overcrowded classrooms, insufficient materials, and lack of pedagogical training limit teachers' ability to implement student-centered learning strategies. Deressa and Beyene (2025) further observed that oral communication skills are often neglected in Ethiopian secondary schools due to constrained pedagogical strategies and teachers' low confidence in facilitating spoken English. These conditions hinder learners' opportunities to actively use English, contrasting with the CLT principles advocated by Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Brown (2007), which emphasize learner participation, meaningful interaction, and authentic communication as central to language acquisition.

Psychological factors also contribute to the challenges observed in the classroom. Some students demonstrate low motivation and limited engagement in English learning activities, particularly in reading tasks. Reading was identified as the least favored skill among learners, which may reflect both linguistic difficulties and negative attitudes toward the subject. When students perceive English as difficult or inaccessible, their motivation to engage in learning activities declines. Moreover, negative classroom experiences, such as limited feedback, lack of encouragement, or inappropriate teacher behavior, can further undermine students' confidence and willingness to participate in English communication. Classroom observations revealed that some teachers occasionally used grammatically inaccurate English, relied heavily on translation, and engaged in behaviors that could discourage student participation. Negewo et al. (2023) similarly reported that inadequate teacher competence and poor classroom management negatively affect student motivation and engagement, reinforcing the need for professional development and supportive teaching environments.

These classroom-level issues are closely linked to broader systemic factors affecting the implementation of English-medium instruction policies. While English plays a crucial role in global communication and national development, as emphasized by Crystal (2009) and Eshetie (2010), the practical implementation of EMI policies often faces significant challenges in resource-constrained

educational environments. In many cases, EMI policies are introduced without sufficient preparation of teachers, adequate instructional materials, or sustained professional development programs. Walga (2024) notes that such systemic gaps—particularly limited teacher training and resource shortages frequently undermine the effective implementation of language policies in Ethiopian secondary schools. Rose et al. (2022) similarly argue that in many Global South contexts, EMI policies are adopted without the necessary pedagogical and infrastructural support, resulting in ineffective classroom outcomes. The findings of this study reflect this broader pattern, demonstrating a clear gap between policy expectations and classroom realities in Bonga Town secondary schools.

Moreover, the challenges identified highlight the interconnected nature of systemic, pedagogical, and psychological factors influencing English language teaching. Teacher proficiency limitations, resource constraints, and inadequate professional development opportunities interact with student attitudes, motivation, and classroom dynamics to create a complex environment affecting learning outcomes. Addressing these challenges therefore requires more than isolated interventions. Effective improvement in EFL teaching will likely require comprehensive reforms, including strengthening teacher education programs, providing continuous professional development, improving access to teaching materials, and fostering supportive classroom environments that encourage active language use.

## **Conclusion**

This study underscores the persistent challenges in English language instruction in secondary schools in Kafa Zone, Ethiopia. Despite national policies promoting English instruction from the early grades, classroom practices remain constrained by limited use of English, teacher-centered instructional approaches, weak classroom management, and insufficient instructional materials. In addition, students demonstrate low engagement in learning activities, particularly in reading and speaking, while some teachers face difficulties related to language accuracy and the effective application of pedagogical strategies.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted response. Teacher training programs should prioritize communicative and student-centered methodologies while also strengthening teachers' English language proficiency. Furthermore, educational resources, including textbooks, audio-visual materials, and digital learning tools, should be made more accessible and equitably distributed across schools. Effective monitoring of policy implementation is also essential, and school leadership should play a proactive role in ensuring the consistent and appropriate use of English in

classroom instruction. At the same time, promoting student agency and creating supportive learning environments can enhance learners' motivation, confidence, and participation.

Overall, the challenges identified in this study are not limited to a particular school or teacher but reflect broader structural issues within the educational system. Bridging the gap between English-medium instruction (EMI) policy and effective classroom practice will require coordinated efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, and teachers. Strengthening teacher preparedness, improving instructional resources, and promoting learner-centered pedagogical approaches are therefore essential steps toward enhancing English language teaching and learning outcomes in Ethiopian secondary schools.

### ***Limitation of the Study***

This study investigated challenges and practices in teaching and learning English in two government high schools in Bonga Town, including four teachers and 120 Grade 9 students. While the mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, provided detailed insights into student strategies, teacher practices, and classroom challenges, the small sample limits the generalizability of the findings to other schools or regions. Nevertheless, the study offers a context-specific analysis of existing situations, indicating issues such as overreliance on the mother tongue and limited exposure to authentic English input. Future research should examine the long-term impact of revised teaching approaches, investigate student-related issues, and conduct comparative studies across diverse regions to inform practical solutions. Ultimately, improving English language education in Ethiopia is not only essential for academic success but also for meaningful participation in a globalized world.

### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION**

From data collection to the final preparation of this manuscript, the author was responsible for all stages of the process.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The author would like to thank the Bonga College of Education for covering cost of data collection, and teachers and students of both schools for giving essential data for the study.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## FUNDING

The author did not receive any financial support from private or government funding for this article publication.

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