RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SUITABILITY OF THE MODULAR CURRICULUM TO OFFER/LEARN SKILL-BASED MODULES IN EFL UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

The modular curriculum was introduced three years ago across all state-owned higher education institutions of Ethiopia. The rationale behind using this curriculum is that students should develop their language skills rather than their knowledge about the English language so that they can effectively attain their communication needs. To this end, related courses are formed into clusters with the aim of giving students sufficient time to exercise specific skill areas. In the modular approach, most of the courses are designed to be covered through the whole semester while few are on blocking basis. In practice, instructors offering skill-based courses as well as students majoring in English are oftentimes observed expressing their complaints about the limitations of the newly introduced curriculum. This study aimed at examining the suitability of the modular approach to offer/learn skill-based modules in EFL classes at Mekelle University. The subjects of the study were students in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature and instructors teaching English courses in the same Department. Questionnaire, focus group interview and classroom observation were the three data gathering tools used. The result of the study shows that language skill developing courses are less suitable to present through the blocking mode in terms of employing student-centred instruction, continuous assessment and practice-oriented lesson delivery. To improve the outcome of the modular approach, all the skill-focused modules should be revisited and redesigned considering the theories and the nature of language skill development in areas where English is considered as a foreign language. Also, technology should be in place to assist the classroom teaching learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Many years have passed since the concept of modular teaching emerged. According to Betts and Smith (2005), it first appeared one hundred years ago in the United States and the idea was later introduced in countries like UK. Describing the start of modularization in UK, ibid (2005) state, "In the 1990s, institutions were faced with the need to develop more flexible, faster and cheaper ways of meeting the needs of the growing number of students. They started to develop modular programmes based on credit accumulation systems in parallel with, or based on, existing curriculum frameworks" (p.3) Over the past several years, Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have adopted conventional curricula which mainly focus on knowledge delivery by presenting courses in a fragmented manner rather than in a modular format. According to Lightfoot (2006), in the traditional system "knowledge is divided into uniform, semester-sized chucks that are delivered

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by an instructor to an audience of students who are physically present when the lecture takes place" (p.65).

Similarly, Schermutzki and Hensbroek (n.d) point out that the conventional system pays more attention to theory which is given priority while application of theoretical concepts seems to be disregarded. In this time of globalization, the need to replace this conventional approach by a practice-based one is becoming mandatory as the prime responsibility of HEIs is giving training and supplying skilled manpower to the labour market. The Ethiopian HEIs Proclamation No. 650/2009 Article 21 declares that the curriculum in general and the mode of lesson delivery and assessment in particular by HEIs should put the learner in the limelight of learning in terms of enabling them to attain 'scientific knowledge', autonomous thinking, communicative competence, and professionalism which together make them capable citizens. The Proclamation Art 21 sub article 5 states that the higher institutions have the responsibility to design a curriculum jointly and work towards to their implementation (FDRE, 2009). In consequence, a nationally harmonized modular curriculum for undergraduate program in English Language and Literature has been

developed by different universities of the nation and it is currently being implemented in every university in the country. This curriculum document (2013) sets forth that "The curriculum is designed focusing on the competencies the graduates need to attain by integrating English language knowledge and skills, and aspires to effectively prepare professionals for diverse job opportunities in the areas where the country needs skilled professionals" (p.3). The underlying rationale for replacing the conventional curriculum with the new one, as pointed out in the curriculum document, is that in the traditional curriculum related courses spread out across the semesters with the aim of developing students' knowledge rather than competence and it does not give value to the time students spend studying. Betts and Smith (2005) hold that "Often issues of student committed time are conveniently ignored in traditional systems" (p.35).Subsequently, a modular curriculum whose emphasis is to develop competence has come to reality. The curriculum for the Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Language and Literature has been formed into clusters (14 modules). Among these modules, 3 of them are skill-based core modules and they are clustered into each of the modules as shown in Table 1.

starting from the stated academic year. The Department of Foreign Languages and Literature specifically adopts this modular approach and begins delivering courses in both parallel and blocking formats, but instructors as well as students accept it with mixed feelings. Due to the 'nature of foreign language learning', many of the skill-based courses are being taught through the whole semester basis. There are some courses, however, which are being offered through blocking, but with no justification. The suitability of these skill-based courses in terms of employing learner-centered approach, conducting continuous assessment and practice-oriented delivery has not been inspected so far. This study was, therefore, aimed to answer the following 3 research questions:

- Is the modular curriculum suitable in terms of implementing student-centred instruction to teach/learn skill-based English language modules in EFL classes?
- Is the modular curriculum suitable in terms of employing continuous assessment in skill-based English language modules in EFL classes?

Table 1. Skill-based English language modules

Module No	Module Name	Module code	List of Courses	Delivery Mode
1	Basic English Skills	EnLaM1011	Communicative English Skills	parallel
			Basic Writing Skills	parallel
2	Aural-Oral Skills	EnLaM1021	Listening Skills	parallel
			Spoken English I	Blocking
			Spoken English II	Blocking
			Advanced Speech	Parallel
3	Reading and Writing Skills	EnLaM2041	Communicative English Grammar	Blocking
			Reading Skills	Parallel
			Intermediate Writing Skills	Parallel
			Advanced Writing Skills	Parallel

Term	Definition
Effectiveness	refers to the extent to which the actual outcomes of instruction match the intended or desired effects.
Skill-based module	is a module whose aims are developing either students' listening, writing, speakingor reading skills.
Suitability	isthe quality of being right or apt in the teaching learning process.

The unique feature of the modular curriculum is that there is a shift from using a credit hour system (which gives emphasis to the instructors' effort) to a credit system based on the European Credit Transfer and Credit Accumulation System (ECTS) which focuses on learning outcomes and the amount of time necessary to achieve the outcomes, among others. As modular curriculum is new for Ethiopian HEIs, revision based on the existing situation during the implementation stage is necessary. As THE (1995) explains, the first some years of practical use of a curriculum are assumed to be characterized by experimentation, flaws and much learning.The current study, therefore, makes an attempt to fill the gaps observed in the newly introduced modular curriculum especially the English Harmonized Curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

All of the state-owned higher education institutions of Ethiopia have implemented a modular curriculum in their undergraduate programmes as of 2013. As one of the HEIs, Mekelle University (MU) also put this new curriculum into effect

- Is the modular curriculum suitable in terms of delivering skill-based courses in a practice-oriented manner?

Operational definitions

Terms and Definitions (which is placed within Table 1 should come here

Limitation of the Study

Because of the size of the samples of the instructors, students and the institution, the results of study are limited to MU. However, the findings gained from this study can be taken into account in other similar HEIs in Ethiopia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Module and Modular Curriculum

Different authors have attempted to define the term 'module'. Sejpal (2013) maintains that "Module is a unit of work in a course of instruction that is virtually self-contained and a method of teaching that is based on the building up of skills and knowledge in discrete units" (p.169). For Sweet (2014) the

term 'module' refers to an instructional unit that focuses on a particular topic. Hornby (2006) also defines a module as "a unit that can form part of a course of study, especially at a college or university" (p.946). Therefore, a module is a course that together with other related courses can constitute a particular area of specialization. Meanwhile a modular curriculum is a teaching approach which uses the principle of independent learning as its base. Courses in the modular approach are "based on the principle that the curriculum is divided into discrete units or modules of learning which are normally, though not always, assessed independently. Each unit or module is a measured part of an extended learning experience leading to a specified qualification(s) "for which a designated number, and normally sequence, of units or modules is required." (www.timeshighereducation.co.uk). Rodeiro and Nadas (n.d) state that a modular instruction is one in which the content is divided into a number of units or modules, each of which is assessed separately" (p.v).

Advantage and Disadvantage of Modular Curriculum

Recently, institutions in different parts of the world seem to be attracted towards implementing the modular curriculum by adapting it to their own context. These academic institutions base their arguments on some qualities of this modular approach. Sejpal (2013) lists the plus points that help to adopt modular curriculum:

- Learning became more effective.
- It establishes a system of assessment other than marks or grade.
- Users study the modules in their own working environment. • Users can study without disturbing the normal duties and responsibilities
- Modules can be administered to single use, small group or large group.
- Modules are flexible so that implementation can be made by a variety of patterns.
- It is more appropriate to mature students.
- It enables the learner to have a control over his learning.
- Accept greater responsibility for learning.
- It already got wider accessibility in the present educational scenario. (p.169)

Also,Rodeiro and Nadas (n.d.) argue that the motive behind exercising the modularized instruction came from teachers desire to make the curriculum based on students' interest and "to provide increased extrinsic motivation through the setting of short-term assessment targets" (p.3). On the other hand, the modular approach has also some liabilities. It is proper to use it with mature learners who take full responsibility for their own learning. Requiring a smart classroom setting with ICT facilities is one of the drawbacks of this structure. Criticism also lies on the place it gives to student choice which damages the coherence and integrity of a particular academic programme. (www.timeshighereducation.co.uk)

EFL Classrooms: Centers of Language Learning

In Ethiopia English is considered as a foreign language. According to Stern (1983, p.16) the term foreign language refers to the teaching or learning of a second language far from the country or speech community where it is normally spoken. Students often learn the language within the classroom setting and they do not have English speaking society with which they can exercise and further learn the language in outside-the-classroom context. Freed (1991) maintains, "In a foreign language learning situation, the most common and most obvious learning situation is the more-or-less traditional language classroom" (p.12). Prominent researchers in the field of ELT suggest that learners of a given target language should be provided with the opportunity to spend a considerable amount of time with the language. Patten (in Freed 1991) states, "The move to an advanced stage of acquisition takes considerable time and exposure to meaningful language" (p.70). Likewise, Ellis (2005) contends that language learning that takes place whether naturally or in schools is a slow and tiresome process. He says, "Language learning, whether it occurs in a naturalistic or an instructed context, is a slow and labour-intensive process" (p.38). Vygotsky, the proponent of Socio-Cultural Theory, also holds that classroom interaction and participation enhance the learning opportunities in a foreign language learning situation (cited in Mousa 2009, p.5). The classroom is a source of multiple aspects of the new language, among which one is language input.

As Krashen (1982) puts it, students should be provided with adequate 'comprehensible input' in the language learning classroom. Ellis (2005) suggests that to work out the limited opportunity to get language inputs, students should be encouraged to use the target language within the classroom and that they should be supplied with inputs outside the classroom context by arranging a programme for them to read graded and carefully selected texts. He further says that whenever there are adequate resources, it is imperative to set up self-access rooms for students' use after their regular class schedule.

Aspects of the Modular Curriculum

The English Harmonized Curriculum which was put into effect in 2013 in Ethiopian HEIs has some special features. These include, the implementation of learner-centered instruction, continuous assessment and competency-focused language delivery.

Learner-Centred Instruction

The concept of learner-centred instruction places students at the centre of learning. Nadeem (2013) states, the learner-centered approach considers that students are active and have unlimited potential for personal development. The focus of teaching is individual learners rather than the body of information. In this approach the students learn by participating in different classroom activities and they take most of the class's time, so teachers' talk time is significantly less. Besides, they are highly responsible for their own learning. Kain (2003) explains that in learner-centered approaches, the construction of knowledge is shared, and learning is achieved through learners' engagement with various activities. In this regard, the ECTS gives a special place to the amount of student effort, the learning outcomes and student involvements in different classroom activities. Thus, students' work load has been

calculated by considering the classroom learning time, tutorials they receive and home study/individual work.

Continuous Assessment

One way of securing quality education is by assessing students' progress continuously and filling the gaps observed in their skills based on the results of the assessment. Rivers *et al.* (1988) state, "Tests should act as a guide to both student and teacher as to progress made, level of proficiency attained, gaps to be filled, misinterpretations and misconceptions, and the need for further learning or further teaching" (cited in Pachler, 1999, p.251). The curriculum which is being used currently in Ethiopian universities dictates that the continuous assessments should either constitute half (50 per cent)or more than half of the total marks while the final exam accounts for 40 to 50 per cent in a course. However, in the curriculum, there is no limit on the number of assessments students should take before the final exam.

Language Delivery: Blocking Versus Parallel (Whole Semester)

Modular curriculum in the undergraduate programmes of Ethiopian HEIs is designed to be put into effect through two modes: blocking and parallel (whole semester) teaching. King and Craik (2012) state that block teaching denotes any teaching programme where the teaching is covered within 6 weeks or less. It is further noted that the term block teaching is used to refer to three study approaches.

- A course which has a normal structure with students studying units concurrently, but study time associated with these units is delivered in concentrated 'blocks'. e.g. courses taught on a weekend model or in intensive weeks of scheduled learning in alternate weeks.
- A course structured so students study units sequentially i.e. one unit at a time.
- A combined approach where units are studied sequentially through a period of intensive scheduled learning followed by guided study. (http://www.beds.ac.uk)

On the other hand, the parallel approach is a way of delivering courses for not less than 15 consecutive weeks. King and Craik (2012, p.1) explain that teaching activities are uniformly spread throughout the first 12 weeks, typically with 3 or 4 hours of staff/student contact per week. Summative assessment is undertaken after 12 weeks of learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

As the aim of this study was to investigate the suitability of the modular curriculum to offer/learn skill-based language courses, a descriptive survey method was used. Best and Kahn (2003) maintain that "A descriptive study describes and interprets what *is*. It is concerned with conditions or relationships that exist, opinions that are held, processes that are going on, effects that are evident, or trends that are developing" (p. 115). The study employed a mixed-method approach which consists of qualitative and quantitative research. According to Dornyei (2007), "Mixed methods research involves different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels." (p.115)

Subjects of the Study

Second and third year students of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature (MU) and their instructors (from the same Department) were the subjects of this study. Both groups were involved in the study as main data sources because they were the ones who were directly affected by the situation and who could provide first-hand information about the overall teaching learning process.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. To select students who filled in the questionnaire, a simple random sampling technique was used. On the other hand, instructors who offered skill-based language courses to students majoring in English were drawn purposively. Tongco (2007) states, "The purposive sampling technique is a type of non-probability sampling that is most effective when one needs to study a certain cultural domain with knowledgeable experts within" (p.169). In this study 30 students and 6 instructors participated. Both groups contributed valuable insights about the general teaching learning process.

Data Collection Instruments

This study used three data collection instruments: questionnaire, focus group interview and classroom observation. It was believed that employing multiple data sources helps to cross-check and to validate the results of the study which increases both the validity and the reliability of data evaluation. (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989; Patton, 1990) The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended survey items. The first part was aimed at gathering background information about the respondents. The second part dealt with students' opinions regarding the situation of student-centered instruction, continuous assessment and course delivery of skill-based courses in EFL classes. The classification in the rating scale was set up in 3 categories: always, sometimes and never. Before administering the questionnaire, it was pre-tested on 15 students who were in the same Department and year with the subjects of this study but who were not part of the current study. The pilot study helped in identifying and ironing out problems with the format, wording and ambiguities of the questionnaire before it was sent out to the right respondents. In addition, the reliability of the questionnaire was established with Cronbach's Alpha that yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.79 indicating a high internal consistency. The instrument was validated by two experts who specialized in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

The second data gathering tool was focus group interview. This tool was used assuming that it was an economical way of collecting large amount of data within short time and it would give the researchers a chance to probe pertinent information and clarify vague ideas on the spot. Dollar and Merrigan (2002) hold that focus group interviews and other qualitative methods are "intended to provide researchers with means for collecting data that can be used to construct a descriptive account of the

phenomena being investigated" (p.6). Dornye (2007) further says, "within-group interaction can yield high-quality data as it can create a synergistic environment that results in a deep and insightful discussion" (p.131). A semi-structured format was preferred since it was thought that it would give a chance for the researcher to ask open and close-eneded questions simultaneously. The focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of students and a group of instructors (each containing 6 people) for an hour each, on average. Although there was homogeneity within the student-group organization, the two groups were heterogynous in terms of their academic achievement. For instance, respondents' in the first group earned GPA of > 3 while in the other group they registered GPA of < 3. This was done with the belief that involving different ability groups would allow the researchers to gather a wide range of data. The interview was tape-recorded transcribed and then analyzed to explore the depth and nuances of opinions regarding the issue under investigation.

A structured classroom observation was the third data gathering tool. The purpose of the observations was to gather information about how student-centered instruction and continuous assessment were implemented in EFL classrooms. Two observers conducted the observations together for a total of 12 successive sessions.

Data Analysis

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. Quantitative data was gathered through the close-ended items in the questionnaire and observations. It was analyzed with the help of a statistical software package (SPSS 16). The research questions were answered by calculating the mean (x) and the grand mean (which was calculated by adding up all the single mean values and then dividing it by the total number of items under the same theme).

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured focus group interviews. After transcribing the focus group interview data, the participants validated the correctness of the English version of their ideas. Then it was analyzed by categorizing similar items under the same theme. The data from the questionnaireand focus group interview were treated together (synchronized) so that they could give complete meaning about the issues at hand.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

'Results of Student' Questionnaire and Focus Group Interview

age respectively. This shows that both sex groups were part of the study and they were found to be within the appropriate age ranges to attend university education.

Student-Centeredness through Blocking and Parallel

Table 3 and Table 4 are concerned with the practical implementation of student-centred instruction (SCI) to learn skill-based courses through blocking and parallel approaches respectively.

Table 3. The Implementation of SCI (Blocking)

Item No	Response						Total		Mean
	Always		Sometimes		Never				
	F	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	X
1	16	53.3	13	43.3	1	3.3	30	100	1.5
2	6	20	21	70	3	10	30	100	2.1
3	4	13.3	18	60	8	26.7	30	100	1.86
4	10	33.3	15	50	5	16.7	30	100	2.16
5	3	10	20	66.7	7	23.3	30	100	1.86
6	7	23.3	17	56.7	6	20	30	100	1.96
							Grand Mean		1.9

Please see item description on Appendix A

As shown in Table 3, more than half of the respondents (53.3 per cent) hold that their instructors who offered skill-based modules gave lectures most of the time while 43.3 per cent of them rated sometimes. The remaining 3.3 per cent of them agreed that instructors never used lectures. Regarding instructors' endeavours to arrange pair/group discussions (item 2), 70 per cent of the respondents reported that they sometimes did so while 20 per cent of them explained that they always employed pair/group discussions. The other 10 per cent of them did not observe their instructors getting students into groups. The respondents were also asked whether instructors provided them with enough opportunity to practice different language skills (item 3). In this regard, the largest proportion of the respondents (60 per cent) described that they sometimes had such an opportunity whereas 26.7 per cent revealed that they never had one. In item 4, half of the respondents (50 per cent) explicated that their instructors sometimes encouraged them to develop their language skills. On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who admitted that instructors gave them encouragement was 33.3. It was only 16.7 per cent of the respondents who said instructors never did so. Respondents were also requested to respond to the item regarding instructors' attempt to create a cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom. In this regard, majority of them (66.7 per cent) stated that instructors sometimes created an environment for the students to work cooperatively.

Table 2. Respondents' Background Information

Gender				Age									Total	
Male		Female		19		20		21		22				
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
16	53.3	14	46.7	5	16.7	15	50	7	23.3	3	10	30	100

As shown in Table 2, majority of the respondents (53.3 per cent) were male and the remaining 46.7 per cent were females. These respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 22 and 50, 23.3, 16.7and 10 per cent of them were 20, 21, 19, and 22 years of

From the remaining respondents, 23.3 per cent of them identified that they never observed this kind of classroom atmosphere while 10 per cent of them agreed they always learnt in cooperative learning classroom settings. Item 6 was

about the opportunity to work independently. Accordingly, 56.7 per cent of them said they sometimes had less opportunity to practice language elements by themselves. The other 23.3 and 20 per cent of the respondents chose 'always' and 'never' respectively concerning the issue. The mean values of the six items were found to be between 1.5 and 2.16 and the grand mean (i.e. 1.9) inclined to the frequency 'sometimes'.

This depicts that instructors who gave skill-based modules in the blocking format had limitations in using student-centred instruction fully and effectively in the EFL classrooms. Different reasons were mentioned for such observed methodological evasion, according to the data from the focus group interview. Firstly, both instructors and students seemed to have a misconception about the basic concept of how skill-based courses should be handled in a student-centred approach. Participants of the focus group interviews illustrated that certain instructors ordered students to present the contents of the course in a form of oral or written assignments and some others gave group assignments (usually with 5 members in a group) to be presented by one person from the group. Secondly, time is the major factor for ineffective implementation of SCI in skill-based language modules. The focus group interviewee disclosed that oftentimes classes interrupted for various reasons. Since students were tightly scheduled with classes and assignments, it was not easy for them to attend make-up classes or tutorials. In such circumstances, instructors preferred to cover course contents through the teacher-fronted way, a typical characteristic of a conventional teaching system.

Table 4. The Implementation of SCI (Parallel)

Item No	Response						Total		Mean
	Always		Sometimes		Never				
	F	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	X
1	17	56.7	13	43.3	-	-	30	100	1.43
2	22	73.3	7	23.3	1	3.3	30	100	2.7
3	12	40	13	43.3	5	16.7	30	100	2.23
4	18	60	8	26.7	4	13.3	30	100	2.46
5	11	36.7	17	56.7	2	6.7	30	100	2.3
6	10	33.3	18	60	2	6.7	30	100	1.73
							Grand Mean		2.14

Please see item description on Appendix A

Table 4 shows the situation of use of SCI in skill-based language courses which were given throughout the semester. The largest percentage of respondents (56 per cent) (in item 1) maintained that their instructors always taught skill-based modules through lectures while 43.3 per cent of them admitted that instructors always lectured. Item 2 dealt with instructors' efforts to arrange students in pairs and groups. In this regard, over 2/3 of the participants (73.3 per cent) revealed that they always got into pairs and groups to do different activities whereas 23.3 per cent of them said they sometimes did so.In item 3, respondents were asked whether instructors provided them with enough practicing time or not. Majority of the respondents (43.3 per cent) admitted that they sometimes did so while 40 per cent of them pointed out that instructors always arranged them practicing time. Item 4 talked about instructors' encouragement for students to improve their English language skills. More than half of the respondents (60 per cent) explained that they always encouraged them to develop their

language proficiency while 26.7 per cent of them responded saying 'sometimes'. The 5th item was regarding instructors' efforts to develop students' cooperative learning behavior. Accordingly, 56.7 per cent of the respondents described that they sometimes helped them to work cooperatively. The other 36.7 per cent of them, however, disclosed that instructors' effort was observed always. With regard to the opportunity to develop independent learning (item 6), 60 per cent of the respondents depicted that they were sometimes assisted to improve this skill while 33.3 per cent of them acknowledged that the instructors always helped them to develop independent learning behavior.

The mean score of the respondents ranged between 1.43 and 2.7 and the grand mean (2.14) was inclined to the frequency 'sometimes' which indicates that student-centred instruction was not fully implemented in EFL classes. From the focus group interviews it could be learnt that students had better opportunity to practice their writing skills and reading skills in the parallel format than through blocking. Each student was involved in activities and instructors walked around the classroom and provided feedback to students. This is because, the interviewees reported, in the parallel mode the amount of wasted time due to a number of reasons was less as compared to that of blocking.

Continuous Assessment through Blocking and Parallel

Table 5. Continuous Assessment (Blocking)

Item No	Response						Total		Mean
	Always		Sometimes		Never				
	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	X
7	5	16.7	16	53.3	9	30	30	100	2.13
8	17	56.7	13	43.3	-	-	30	100	2.56
9	14	46.7	11	36.7	5	16.7	30	100	1.7
							Grand Mean		2.13

Please see item description on Appendix A

Table 5 is about continuous assessments that were given through blocking. Regarding individual assessment (item 7), 53.3 per cent of the respondents contended that they sometimes were not given an individual assessment. Contrarily, 30 per cent of the respondents responded positively about the assessments given at individual level. In regards to the regular use of quizzes, assignments, presentations etc. by instructors to assess students level of performance in language skills, 56.7 per cent of the respondents stated they always did use while 43.3 per cent admitted that sometimes they did. Item 9 was concerned with the feedback students received for the assessment they took. Accordingly, 46.7 per cent of the respondents agreed that they received their exam and assignment results after the final exam whereas 36.7 of them revealed that they sometimes saw their results after they completed the course. The mean value of item number seven (2.13) is closer to the frequency 'sometimes'. This indicates that students were given assessments (such as group assignments). In item 8, a mean score of 2.56 (which inclined to the option 'always') was recorded and this shows that the students were given different assessment methods to measure their performance. The mean value 1.7 which is between 'never' and 'sometimes' indicates a gap in action as regards giving feedback timely. The grand mean 2.13 falls under the category 'sometimes' indicating that the quality of using

continuous assessment was not to the required standard. This result is found to be in accord with the result of the focus group interviews. Nearly all of the participants of the interview acknowledged that continuous assessment was usually given in a form of group assignment (which lacks variety as it was stipulated in the course outline). They further said that if the group assignment was to be presented, it was only one person who did the presentations while other group members kept quiet. This implies that there are significant number of students who pass courses leaning on others' efforts and hard work.

Table 7 (containing 8 items) shows respondents' response to items regarding how three of the English language skill modules (listening, reading and writing) which were being given through the parallel mode were addressed in the classroom.

Accordingly, item 10 was concerned with students' involvement in different listening activities. More than half of the respondents (53.3 per cent) agreed that they were sometimes exposed to listening texts while 40 per cent of them

Table 6. Continuous Assessment (Parellel)

Item No	Response						Total		Mean
	Always		Sometimes		Never				
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	X
7	4	13.3	13	43.3	13	43.3	30	100	2.3
8	18	60	11	36.7	1	3.3	30	100	2.5
9	12	40	13	43.3	5	16.7	30	100	1.7
							Grand Mean		2.16

Please see item description on Appendix A

Table 6 (which included 3 items) depicts the situation of continuous assessment in skill-based modules that were given through the parallel mode of delivery. Accordingly, 43.3 per cent of the respondents reported positively that their instructors assessed their language skills at individual level and equal percentage of respondents (43.3 per cent) said they were sometimes assessed individually. The other 13.3 per cent of the respondents responded negatively regarding the presence of individual assessment. Concerning the 8th item, majority of the respondents (60 per cent) explained that they were given continuous assessments in a form of quiz, written assignment, presentation etc. while 36.7 per cent of them admitted that they sometimes took assessments regularly. In item 9, respondents were asked if they received feedback for their tests and assignments after final examinations and 43.3 per cent of them pointed out that they sometimes got their test results and 40 per cent of them reported that they always got their test or assignment scores after they finished courses. The mean values of the items inclined to the frequency 'sometimes' and the grand mean which is 2.16 also indicates that instructors implemented continuous assessment to some extent in skill-based modules that were offered through the whole semester. According to the response from most of the participants of the focus group interview, continuous assessments were being carried out in a better fashion in skill-based courses that were offered across the semester than courses given through blocking in terms of variety and number. The interviewee further said that some instructors even gave them multiple quizzes and they took the ones many students earned better marks on to determine grades.

Lesson Delivery through Blocking and Parallel

affirmed that they always did listening activities. Again the percentages of respondents who admitted that they had 'sometimes' and 'always' less opportunity to listening to texts with varied purposes were 56.7 and 23.3 respectively. Regarding the attention students were given to develop their listening skills (item 13) equal percentage of respondents (40) inclined to the frequencies 'sometimes' and 'always'. Item number 12 was about the amount of time students were given in writing classes. In this regard, 56.7 per cent of the respondents stated that they sometimes did and finished writing activities within the classroom while 23.3 per cent of them reported that that always completed their writing tasks in the classroom. In item 17, respondents were inquired to answer how often they were provided with the opportunity to practice their skills within the classroom and outside the classroom context. Most of the respondents (46.7 per cent) disclosed that they were sometimes given enough opportunity to exercise writing whereas 40 per cent of them hold that they always had the chance to practice. Item 18 was in connection with whether students were given assignments individually or in groups. The largest percentages of respondents (53.3) maintained that they were given writing assignments always in groups rather than individually. The other 36.7 per cent of them admitted that they were sometimes given group assignments. As regards feedback for students' written works (Item 19), 46.7 per cent of the respondents said that they sometimes received feedback from instructors for their writing assignments on time. On the other hand 36.7 per cent of the respondents revealed that they always got feedback on time regarding the writing assignments they submitted. Item 14, 15, and 16 were about students' writing skills in the parallel teaching mode. In item 14, respondents were asked if they spent a lot of time reading different texts in

Table 7. Lesson Delivery (Parallel)

Item No	Response						Total		Mean
	Always		Sometimes		Never				
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	X
10	12	40	16	53.3	2	6.7	30	100	2.33
11	10	33.3	15	50	5	16.7	30	100	1.83
12	7	23.3	17	56.7	6	20	30	100	1.96
13	12	40	12	40	6	20	30	100	2.2
14	6	20	19	63.3	5	16.7	30	100	2.03
15	16	53.3	12	40	2	6.7	30	100	2.46
16	3	10	16	53.3	11	36.7	30	100	2.26
17	12	40	14	46.7	4	13.3	30	100	2.26
18	16	53.3	11	36.7	3	10	30	100	1.56
19	11	36.7	14	46.7	4	13.3	30	100	2.23
							Grand Mean		2.11

Please see item description on Appendix A

the classroom. In this regard, most of the respondents (63.3 per cent) revealed that they sometimes spent considerable amount of time reading texts in-class. On the other hand, 20 per cent of the respondents reported that they always read texts in the classroom. With reference to the way the reading texts were addressed, 53.3 per cent of the respondents pointed out that they always did pre, while and post reading activities whereas 40 per cent of them admitted that they sometime followed such a procedure. Respondents were asked how often they were taught the strategies to read and understand texts without difficulty. From the total respondents, 53.3 per cent of them hold that they were sometimes taught about reading strategies while 36.3 per cent of them responded positively.

The mean values of the 8 items regarding the delivery of skill-based modules through the whole semester format inclined to the option 'sometimes'. However, the mean score 1.56 is far from the grand mean and this shows that students oftentimes were given assignments to be done in groups rather than on individual basis. From the results of the focus group interviews and classroom observations, however, it was possible to learn that students had also the chance to write paragraphs and essays individually within the classroom. The grand mean (2.11) was also closer to the frequency 'sometimes' which indicates that although there are some encouraging efforts being made to improve students language skills, a lot should be done in terms of providing them with meaningful activities, giving practicing opportunity at the individual level and giving them the necessary feedback on time for their attempt.

Table 8. Lesson Delivery (Blocking)

Item No	Always		Sometimes		Never		Total		Mean
	f	%	F	%	f	%	F	%	X
20	1	3.3	8	26.7	21	70	30	100	1.33
21	22	73.3	5	16.7	3	10	30	100	1.36
22	18	60	9	30	3	10	30	100	1.5
23	5	16.7	7	23.3	18	60	30	100	1.56
24	9	30	6	20	15	50	30	100	1.8
25	21	70	7	23.3	2	6.7	30	100	1.36
							Grand Mean		1.48

Please see item description on Appendix A

In Table 8, item 20 to 25 were concerned with the delivery of speaking skills module in EFL classroom that was offered through blocking. In responsive to item 20, the largest proportion of the respondents (70 per cent) agreed that they did not adequately practice the basic units of the Spoken English courses (greetings, partings, introductions etc.) through dialogues and role plays. The other 26.7 per cent of the respondents, however, explained that they sometimes practiced these language components adequately. As far as the amount of activities provided to students to practice speaking was concerned, 73.3 per cent of the participants explicated that they were always exposed to few speaking activities while 16.7 per cent of them expounded that sometimes instructors brought few speaking activities to the class. Regarding the speaking time (item 22), it was reported by 60 per cent of the respondents that instructors took most of the speaking time in the speaking sessions. The other 30 per cent of the respondents stated that instructors sometimes spoke for more hours than the students. In item 23, respondents were asked how often each student was

given an opportunity to practice speaking. Accordingly, 60 per cent of them admitted that every student did not have chance to speak in the classroom whereas 23.3 per cent of them reported that students sometimes had practice to speak in spoken classes. In regard to item number 24 which was about speech or presentations and giving opportunity to every student, half of the respondent (50 per cent) disclosed that they never had individual presentations in the classroom. The percentages of respondents who maintained that they always and sometimes had presentations at individual level were 30 and 20 respectively. Item 25 was about instructors' feedback-giving behavior. In this regard, 70 per cent of the respondents described that their instructors failed to give them feedback regarding their performance in speaking. On the other hand 23.3 per cent of them said that they sometimes failed to give them feedback for their speaking skills.

Except for item 24 (mean = 1.8, closer to sometimes) the mean value of the other items in this category were found to be closer to the grand mean (1.48) which inclined to the frequency 'never'. This implies that the speaking module was not being treated well and properly through the blocking format. In this regard, an agreement was observed between the result of the questionnaire and the focus group interview. In the focus group interview, majority of the participants expounded that time was the major hindering factor in addressing the speaking module properly and effectively. Whenever instructors missed some sessions for various reasons for two consecutive days, for instance, it created a big gap in the overall course progress and student practicing time since there was no any other technological means to make up these wasted hours. To compensate the hours lost, the interviewee reported that instructors usually did three things: giving group assignments, passing the units with shallow treatment, or completing the course without addressing some basic elements of the module.

Results of the Focus Group Interview with Instructors'

A total of 6 instructors who offered skill-based English language modules to students majoring in English were asked 3 questions which focused on the basic research question of this study.

1. To what extent does the modular curriculum enable you to use student-centred instruction to teach skill-based modules through blocking and parallel formats in EFL classes?

The first question EFL instructors were asked was about the suitability of the modular curriculum in terms of enabling them to use student-centred instruction to teach skill-based courses through blocking and parallel modes. Regarding the block courses, nearly all of the respondents admitted that skill-based blocking is quite challenging for them to apply the student-centred instruction to teach language skills in a short period of time. They added that since the course contents should be covered, it puts more demand on both students and instructors. Majority of the respondents admitted that students who joined the Department were with poor English background, so they often become uninterested and reluctant to be involved in classroom activities. As a result, there were occasions where they were forced to shift the method of teaching from student-

centred to the teacher-centred one. The respondents also explained about the situation of skill-based courses that were given through the whole semester. Most of the respondents disclosed that the length of the classes allowed for multiple opportunities for student-centred activities and instruction. Besides, students tended to give fair amount of preparation time for each course as the time for the continuous assessment for each course was stretched across the semester.

2. *To what extent does the modular curriculum enable you to use continuous assessment in skill-based courses in EFL classes?*

Almost all of the respondents reported that in courses given through blocking, with much material to cover in such a short amount of time, they prioritize time to practice and develop skills versus time spent on tests/quizzes. The respondents commented that they would feel their students didn't grasp the required skill if they administered assessments frequently. Further, they explicated that the idea of giving quizzes and tests created a burden on EFL instructors to focus only on the contents rather than developing students' skills. As an alternative, they suggested that interactive assessments which allow for the convergence of practice/application and assessment should be put in place.

3. *Is the modular curriculum suitable in terms of developing students' English language skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening)?*

All of the respondents reported that they did not believe the module that was delivered through blocking truly developed students' English speaking skills. The reason they provided to support their argument was that in skill development there was not a quick-fix. Ellis (2005) also states effective language learning takes considerable amount of time. Students need to have enough time to practice the four skills. Without adequate time for practicing and applying skills, achieving the goals set is incredibly challenging. They also added that the other three skill areas however could effectively be handled if there was commitment especially on their part.

Results of the Classroom Observation

The courses offered through the whole semester were observed 8 times since most of the courses were offered through this mode. The skill-based courses offered through the block format were, on the other hand, observed 4 times due to being few in number.

Table 9. Student –centred instruction

Item No	Parallel		Blocking	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	37.5%	62.5%	50%	50%
2.	75%	25%	25%	75%
3.	75%	25%	25%	75%

Please see the item descriptions on Appendix B.

Table 9 is about the implementation of student-centred instruction in skill-based courses that were given through blocking and parallel basis. In majority of the observations (62.5 per cent) instructors were not observed giving lectures in

skill-based courses that were offered throughout the semester. In the remaining 37.5 per cent of the observations, they gave lectures. In courses given through blocking, however, a different picture was observed; in 50 per cent of the observation instructors were seen lecturing while in the other half they did not lecture. Concerning the presence of individual, pair or group activities, in the 75 per cent of the classroom observations such kind of classroom formations were noticed in the parallel mode of delivery while in the 25 per cent of them they were not seen. In most of the classroom observation in courses offered through blocking, on the other hand, individual, pair and group work activities were not observed. Students' involvement in different activities was possible in 75 per cent of the observations in courses given throughout the semester while it was not in 25 per cent of them. Students were not seen taking part in most of the classroom activities (75 per cent) in courses offered through blocking. During the classroom observation it could be observed one person from each group presented standing in front of the classes representing their group members.

Table 10. Continuous assessment

No	Parallel		Blocking	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
4.	75%	25%	50 %	50%

Please see the item descriptions on Appendix B.

As can be seen in Table 10, in more than half (75 per cent)of the observed classes of the whole semester courses students were seen taking a quiz and pair assignments while in half of the observations of the block course students were seen giving presentations (one student representing 4 other group members). After the presentation, instructors asked oral questions to some selected presenters.

Table 11. Lesson Delivery

No	Parallel		Blocking	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
5.	75% 25%		50%	50%
6.	25% 75%		50%	50%

Please see the item descriptions on Appendix B.

As Table 11 depicts, in majority of the observations in skill-based courses that were given through the parallel mode, instructors arranged the students into pairs and groups whereas such classroom arrangement was seen in 50 per cent of the block courses.

In more than half of the observations (75 per cent) in skill-based courses that were given through the parallel mode the lessons were practical than theoretical while in half of the course that was given through blocking instructors had an active involvement in the lessons and in other half 950 per cent) students were observed giving presentations; for instance, an instructor was observed writing different expressions and dialogues with missing words on the board and students were seen coping what was written and completing the dialogues.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The result of this study shows that the modular curriculum was not suitable to offer/learn skill-based courses in the blocking mode in terms of implementing student-centred instruction, continuous assessment, and competency-based lesson delivery in EFL undergraduate classes. On the other hand, the parallel mode was found to be favourable in relation to these three features as compared to the blocking mode. Nonetheless, the study indicates that these three basic aspects of the curriculum were not being implemented to the required quality because of different factors.

To maximize the benefit of the modular curriculum, the basic principles of modularization should be perceived well by both students and instructors and the demarcation between the conventional curriculum and the modular one should be clearly set. Similarly, skill-based modules should not be offered just to fulfill criteria. They should be given enough time so that students can have the opportunity to practice the language skill tasks and activities adequately; all of the skill-based courses should be designed to be given throughout the semester. Ellis (2005) says language learning especially in classroom settings is a slow and tiresome process. Furthermore, higher education institutions should make effective use of technology. Lessons should not be bound just within the classroom setting. Students should have the freedom to have access to lectures and supplementary materials online anytime. Ibid (2005) recommends that students should be provided with the opportunity to have access to language inputs in out-side the classroom context. Finally, we would like to suggest that every time evaluation of the teaching learning process should be carried out so as to increase the effectiveness of the modular curriculum.

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Appendix A

Mekelle University, College of Social Sciences and Languages, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature

Dear respondents,

This questionnaire is part of a project being carried out to determine the suitability of the modular curriculum (which is designed to be delivered through blocking and whole semester formats) to offer/learn skill-based EFL modules. For this purpose your opinions are being surveyed. It would be appreciated if you could complete this questionnaire, which will take approximately 20 minutes.

In order to ensure that you give your opinions without reservation, the questionnaire is to be completed anonymous. All information will be treated with confidentiality.

Your co-operation will be greatly appreciated!

Please give the applicable information by drawing a cross 'X' in the block indicating the most applicable answer.

1. Sex: Male ☐ Female ☐ 2. Age: 19 ☐ 20. ☐ 21. ☐ Over 22 ☐
3. Year: 1st ☐   2nd ☐   3rd ☐

PART II: Please draw a cross 'X' under the appropriate number corresponding to your answer.

Key: Always = 2   Sometimes = 1   Never = 0

No	Items	In Courses Offered through Blocking			In Courses Offered through the Whole Semester		
		2	1	0	2	1	0
1	The instructors gave lectures.						
2	The instructors arranged students for group/pair discussions.						
3	We (students) were given enough opportunity to practice the different language skill areas.						
4	The instructors encouraged us to speak/write/read/listen to improve our English skills.						
5	The instructors made us work in cooperative learning environment.						
6	There was less opportunity for us to work independently.						
7	The instructors did not assess our skills at individual level.						
8	The instructors assessed our level of performance regularly through quizzes, written assignments, presentations etc.						
9	The instructors showed test (assignment) results after final examination.						

The following items are regarding the skill-based modules delivered through the whole semester: LISTENING SKILLS / READING SKILLS / WRITING SKILLS.

Key: Always = 2   Sometimes = 1   Never = 0

No	Items	2	1	0
10	The instructors involve students in listening activities.			
11	We had less opportunity to listen to texts with varied purposes.			
12	We had little time to do and finish the writing activities within the classroom.			
13	We were given enough attention to develop our listening skills.			
14	We spent more time reading different texts within the classroom.			
15	When reading different texts we do while-reading and post-reading activities in pairs, groups and whole class.			
16	We were not taught the strategies to read and understand texts easily.			
17	We had enough opportunity to develop our writing skills within the classroom and outside the classroom contexts.			
18	In writing skills module, we spent more time on group assignment than individual writing practices.			
19	Students got feedback from their instructors for their writings on time.			

The following items are regarding skill-based modules delivered through blocking: SPOKEN ENGLISH I, SPOKEN ENGLSIH II and COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR

Key: Always = 2   Sometimes = 1   Never = 0

No	Items	2	1	0
20	We practiced each spoken unit (greetings, partings, introductions etc.) adequately within the classroom through dialogues, role plays etc.			
21	The instructors provided us with few speaking activities for us to practice speaking.			
22	The instructors gave more speaking time for themselves than for students.			
23	Every students had the opportunity to speak in the spoken classes.			
24	We gave speech and presentations individually in spoken classes.			
25	The instructors failed to give us comments about our oral performance after we gave presentations.			

Appendix B
Observation Checklist

Course Title: _____ Mode of Delivery: Blocking / Whole Semester
Observation Date: _____ Observation Time: _____Lesson Topic: __

Item No	Items	Yes	No
1	The instructor lectures most of the time.		
2	The instructor allows students to work individually or in pairs and groups.		
3	Students involve in different tasks most of the time.		
4	The instructor gives students quizzes and assignments or other means of assessment individually/in pairs/groups on different occasions		
5	The instructor orders students to discuss ideas (whole class, group and pair)		
6	The lesson is more of theoretical than practical.		

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