

The Use of English as Medium of Instruction and Students' Readiness to Learn in English

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Abstract

This study explored the mismatch between the transition from mother tongue to English medium of instruction and teachers' and students' use of English. The study adopted a mixed method design. A questionnaire was administered to language as well as non-language teachers. Classroom observations were also conducted with non-language teachers who were supposed to use English as a medium of instruction. A group of students participated in focus group discussion, and another group participated in orally administered questions. Furthermore, grade 10 national examination results were analyzed. The findings revealed incongruity between the widely held perceptions about the English medium of instruction (teachers and students consider English as the language of science and technology, a language that facilitates future career development, and a language of success) and teachers' and students' use of English as a medium of instruction. The performance of students who made the transition in grade nine is significantly lower than those of others in almost all examination periods. There is an apparent difference in the performance of students who transitioned from a mother-tongue language to English as the medium of instruction at different levels. Generally, students who made the transition in grade seven were found to be superior in terms of achievement on grade ten national examinations to those who transitioned either in grade five or nine. The study uncovered teachers' limited use of English as the medium of instruction and a lack of readiness among students to learn in English.

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Introduction

There were different practices in relation to the use of the language of instruction in Ethiopia since the beginning of formal schooling in 1908, when Emperor Menelik II opened the first primary school, Ecole Imperiale Menelik, in Addis Ababa (Fasika, 2014). According to Pankhrust (1969), schools used foreign languages as a medium of instruction, such as French, English, and Italian. During the Italian Occupation (from 1935 to 1941), Ethiopia officially changed the medium of instruction to mother-tongue (Heugh, Benson, Berhanu, & Mekonnen,

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2007; Seifu, 2014). The Italians divided Ethiopia into six administrative regions where the language of instruction was different in all regions (Pankhrust, 1969; Teshome, 1979). When the Italians withdrew, Emperor Haile Selassie's government chose English as the medium of instruction. The first national curriculum, published in 1947, stated that Amharic should be the medium of instruction for all subjects in the first two grades (Grade 1 and 2), with a gradual transition to English beginning in the third grade (Solomon, 2008). Solomon further stated that Amharic became the language of instruction at the elementary level for the first time with the 6-2-4 educational structure of the country.

Following the curriculum, in the revised constitution of 1955, Amharic remained the medium of instruction in elementary schools throughout the country, and English continued to serve as a medium of instruction for the secondary level and above (Heugh et al., 2007). In the 1960s, the study conducted by the Department of Research and Curriculum Development (RCD) of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education on the use of mother-tongue instruction in Ethiopia still maintained Amharic as a medium of instruction at the primary level. Their logic was that children should be taught in a language with which they were familiar. However, it should be noted that a good number of children did not speak Amharic (Heugh et al., 2007).

In 1976, although it was only on paper, the government declared that nationalities were given the right to use their languages for educational and administrative purposes (Heugh et al., 2007; Fasika, 2014; Getachew & Derib, 2006). After the declaration, fifteen local Ethiopian languages (Afan Oromo, Wolayta, Somali, Hadiya, Kambata, Tigrigna, Sidama, Gedeo, Afar, Kafa, Mochigna, Saho, Kunama, Silti, and Amharic) were used for a national literacy campaign (Getachew & Derib, 2006; Katrin & Janine, 2009; Wondwosen & Jan, 2009) in non-formal education modes. In formal education, however, Amharic continued as the only "language of instruction and administration" (Heugh et al., 2007).

The use of mother tongue instruction was put in place in Ethiopia in 1994 with the country's new education and training policy. The policy recognizes the student's mother tongue as an appropriate medium of instruction and stipulates that primary education (grades 1-8) should be delivered in the student's mother tongue. Generally, the policy implicitly states 9th grade as the level of transition from mother-tongue to the English medium of instruction. However, the policy allows regions to select a language and determine and decide the grade level at which the transition from mother-tongue to a selected language medium of instruction occurs. The policy states that nations and nationalities can either use their language as the medium of instruction or choose from a list of languages selected based on the national and countrywide distribution (TGE, 1994). Currently, 51 languages are being used as the medium of instruction in different parts of Ethiopia (MoE, 2016). However, there are different practices among regions in terms of the duration that these languages are used as a medium of instruction. Some regions, for example, SNNPR, Gambela, and Benishangul-Gumuz use mother tongue languages only for the first four grade levels, whereas Tigray, Oromia, and Somali use mother tongue languages for the whole primary school years. There are also regions and city administrations like Afar and Addis Ababa, which use mother tongue languages for the first six years of primary schooling.

The presence of multiple mother-tongue languages in most regions of Ethiopia is a challenge for the effective implementation of teaching in the mother-tongue language. Regardless of the presence of minority mother tongues, regions pick one or two working language(s), in most cases the widely spoken languages in the region, for instructional purposes. As a result, some children are learning in languages other than their mother tongue. This poses difficulty in learning to read and write in the language.

English as a medium of instruction is mandatory in Ethiopia starting from grade nine. On the other hand, English is delivered as a subject starting from grade one. However, although English is taught as a subject from grade one and teachers are supposed to use English while teaching English, the reality on the ground does not show this fact. A good number of students are found struggling with English to learn other subjects. The poor instruction of English in primary schools has strongly affected students' use of English as the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education. More frustrating is that even English teachers in primary and secondary education are struggling with English to properly use the language as the medium of instruction. In Ethiopia, a transition from Mother tongue to English as a medium of instruction is unavoidable, at least shortly. Hence, the quality and practice of the mother tongue and English medium of instruction need to be explored. Therefore, this study explores the context of mother tongue instruction and its transition into the English medium of instruction. It focuses on the English language as the medium of instruction in Ethiopian primary schools. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the use of English as the medium of instruction vis-à-vis teachers' and students' practices and perceptions toward the use of the English medium of instruction.

Review of Related Literature

Language can become a barrier to gaining knowledge or developing skills if students are not familiar with the language of instruction. Daby (2015) reports that the nature of school language can be a barrier to the academic achievements of students at the primary level. Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2015), in their review of related literature, show that students who are proficient in the language of instruction perform well in subjects taught in that language. They further reported that students who are not proficient in the language of instruction perform poorly in subjects taught in that language.

In arguing for the advantage of teaching in mother tongue languages, Bender, Dutcher, Klaus, Shore, and Shore (2005) indicate that mother tongue instruction increases access and equity, improves learning outcomes, reduces repetition and dropout rates, has socio-cultural benefits, and lowers overall costs that would be expended for education. Similarly, Heugh et al. (2007) describe that learning in mother-tongue is an advantage for students because it allows students to interact with the teacher in ways that enhance effective and efficient learning. Many others recognize the advantages of mother tongue instruction in enhancing children's understanding of the content they learn (Maseko & Dhlamini, 2014) and in laying a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages (Ball, 2011). According to Ball, children learn the second language quickly if taught in their mother tongue throughout primary school and gradually transition to academic learning in the second language. Pflapsen (2015) also believes that learning in a mother tongue

lays a solid foundation for acquiring a second language and improves learning outcomes. In emphasizing the importance of providing mother tongue instruction in primary school, Heugh et al. (2007) further report that in the regions where primary schooling is offered with solid mother tongue instruction, students showed higher achievement in grade 8 in all subjects, including English.

The World Bank (2005) report, emphasizing the advantages of learning in mother-tongue languages, indicates that an education system that does not consider local culture and language is characterized by low intake, high repetition, and high dropout rates. According to this report, learners may find it difficult to perceive the relevance of education if given in an unfamiliar language. Learning concepts and developing competencies become complicated if the instruction is in a different language. That is, students may learn little or nothing unless they can understand the language of textbooks and the language used by teachers. Related to this point, Wolff (2005, p. 3) stated, "language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education." That is, if learners fail to make simple communication with their teachers, there is little to be gained from spending resources on new curricula, programs, classrooms, textbooks, or technology. Hence, the language teachers use in the classroom is essential.

Apart from the advantages of providing primary education in mother-tongue language, the practice of using mother-tongue language as a medium of instruction at the primary education level varies from country to country. Muthwii (2004), for example, mentioned that in Kenya, the mother-tongue language Kalenjin is used as a medium of instruction in primary classes 1–3, and English or Kiswahili from primary class 4 on, where the children are on average nine years old. In Uganda, the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction in lower primary classes 1-3 (Humphry, 2013). Edzordzi (2015) reviewed the education policy of Nigeria and indicated that in Nigeria, the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is used as a medium of instruction at the pre-primary level and in the first three years of the six-year primary education. Moreover, English is taught as a school subject. The researcher further indicated that English is used as the medium of instruction and the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community continues to be studied as a school subject from the fourth year onwards.

The use and command of the English language are frequently regarded as indications of upward social and economic mobility. The use of English as a medium of instruction is a highly contested issue in a multilingual context, often with multifaceted political, socio-cultural, and economic implications. While some parents, teachers, and policymakers advocate for the use of English in schools, researchers and pedagogic theorists argue that prolonged mother tongue education matters for learning and knowledge attainment. When it comes to the language of instruction in schools, transitioning to an early grade English medium of instruction or the use of sustained mother tongue instruction at the primary school level are policies worth exploring (Kumi, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

As described in the background section, regions differ in their use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction and the levels that children transit from mother tongue to English

medium of instruction. Once the transition decision is made, teachers and students are expected to use English for teaching and learning purposes entirely. However, the practice appears to be either to use the mother tongue or mix languages in place of using the English language as medium of instruction. The problem seems to be related to the English language competence of both teachers and students. It is common to see the frequent switch between two or more languages in a classroom while teachers are expected to teach in English. Baker (2001) and Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2015) also reported the common practice of language shifting in bilingual or multilingual classrooms. They mentioned that the use of two languages in a bilingual classroom is regularly practiced sometimes without official backing from the policymakers.

Hence, the primary purpose of this study was to explore the use of English as a medium of instruction vis-à-vis teachers' and students' practices and perceptions toward the use of the English medium of instruction. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions: (1) What is the practice related to the use of English as a medium of instruction? (2) What are teachers' perceptions about students' English language use during instruction? (3) Is there a difference in achievement between students who transit early and who transit late in terms of achievement?

Methods

This research used a mixed-method approach with a focus on the quantitative method and involved the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The mixed-method approach offsets the limitations inherent in each approach and leads to results with greater validity because the method addresses questions from different perspectives and ensures that there are no “gaps” in the data to be gathered (Creswell, 2008). Qualitative as well as quantitative data were collected from teachers and students. Furthermore, data from the secondary source were used.

The sampling procedures used were both random and purposive sampling. Nearly all regions and the two city administrations in Ethiopia were included in the study. A total of 16 languages were selected purposively out of 51 languages that are used as the medium of instruction in the country. After identifying the languages, 19 zones were randomly selected. A total of 57 schools were randomly selected from 19 zones.

A total of 1279 respondents (607 students who provided written responses for three uniformly administered oral questions, 300 students who participated in FGDs, 273 non-mother tongue language teachers, and 99 non-mother tongue language teachers for classroom observations) were included in the study. The determination of sample size is an issue that bothers researchers, and there is no clear answer for this (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) as it depends on the level of accuracy required and the heterogeneity of the population characteristics being investigated, as well as the kind of analysis to be conducted on the data (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), for a population of size 1 million with a margin of error of 0.05, the minimum sample size required is 384. Considering this fact, the sample size used in this study was considered sufficient at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The sampling procedure used for selecting non-language teachers for completing the questionnaire was random, and five teachers were selected from each school using a lottery method. Besides, two non-mother tongue language teachers were randomly selected from each school, and those willing were observed while teaching. Two groups of students were included in this study. One group participated in focus group discussion, and the other participated in orally administered questions. Those students who could express their ideas were purposively selected with the help of school principals and participated in 52 FGDs conducted in different language groups. Students from grades 5, 7, and 9, depending on the level of transition in each region, were selected randomly from those classes where classroom observations were carried out. Teachers who were observed were not used for completing the questionnaire. The researchers employed four types of data collection instruments: FGD protocol, questionnaire, classroom observation checklist, and three orally presented questions that required written responses from students. In addition, the researchers used five years 10th-grade national examination results as proxy indicators of differences in the performance of students who transit in grades 5, 7, and 9. The research team collected 10th-grade national examination letter grades of students who took the national examinations during 2011/12 to 2015/16 academic years from the National Education Assessment and Examination Agency (NEAEA). Letter grades were collected on eight subjects: English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Civics, Geography, and History. Since the data obtained from NEAEA were letter grades, the analysis was made by converting letter grades to their numeric equivalents (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0). Letter grades may not clearly show the actual performances of students. However, the researchers believe that letter grades may provide a rough estimation of students' performance. The researchers analyzed only the results of government schools to ensure similarity in terms of the use of mother-tongue languages and English as the medium of instruction. In addition, the analysis was made only for students who sat for all courses during the examination. The scores for Amharic were excluded from the 2011/12 results to maintain similarity with the results of the subsequent years. The average performance of students was determined based on the eight subjects mentioned above.

Data collection took place with the help of trained field assistants. Teachers completed the questionnaire on their own with the help of data collectors. The data collectors for each data collection site conducted interviews and FGDs. Data collection from students with orally administered questions was done in the following manner. Right after the classroom observation and before students were dismissed, a brief description was given of the subsequent task. After the description, one student from each table was asked to remain seated. The rationale for selecting one student from each table was to discourage support they may get from each other. An average of six students represented each class. The data collectors distributed a blank sheet of paper to each student and read the following three questions one after the other. The questions were: How old are you? What is your native language? How many school friends do you have? The researchers assumed that these questions would not be difficult for grade 5, 7, and 9 students. The written responses were collected mainly from grades 5, 7, and 9. Quantitative data were entered and cleaned using statistical software SPSS version 21 and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 11, qualitative data analysis software.

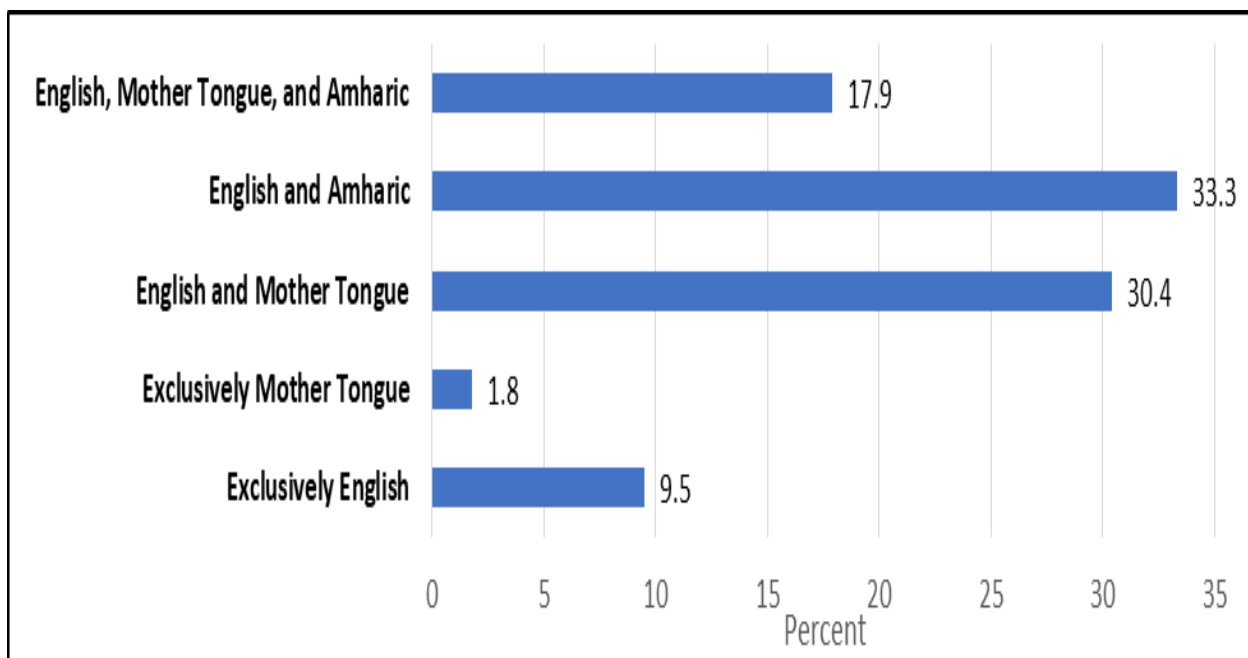
Results and Discussion

Use of English by Teachers

Although teachers are expected to use English as the medium of instruction at grade levels decided by the respective region, the existing practice appears to be different. The quantitative data collected through a questionnaire revealed that only 9.5% of non-language teachers used English exclusively while teaching non-language subjects. Most teachers used English mixed with Amharic or another mother-tongue language while teaching. Figure 1 shows the languages used by teachers while teaching non-language subjects.

Figure 1

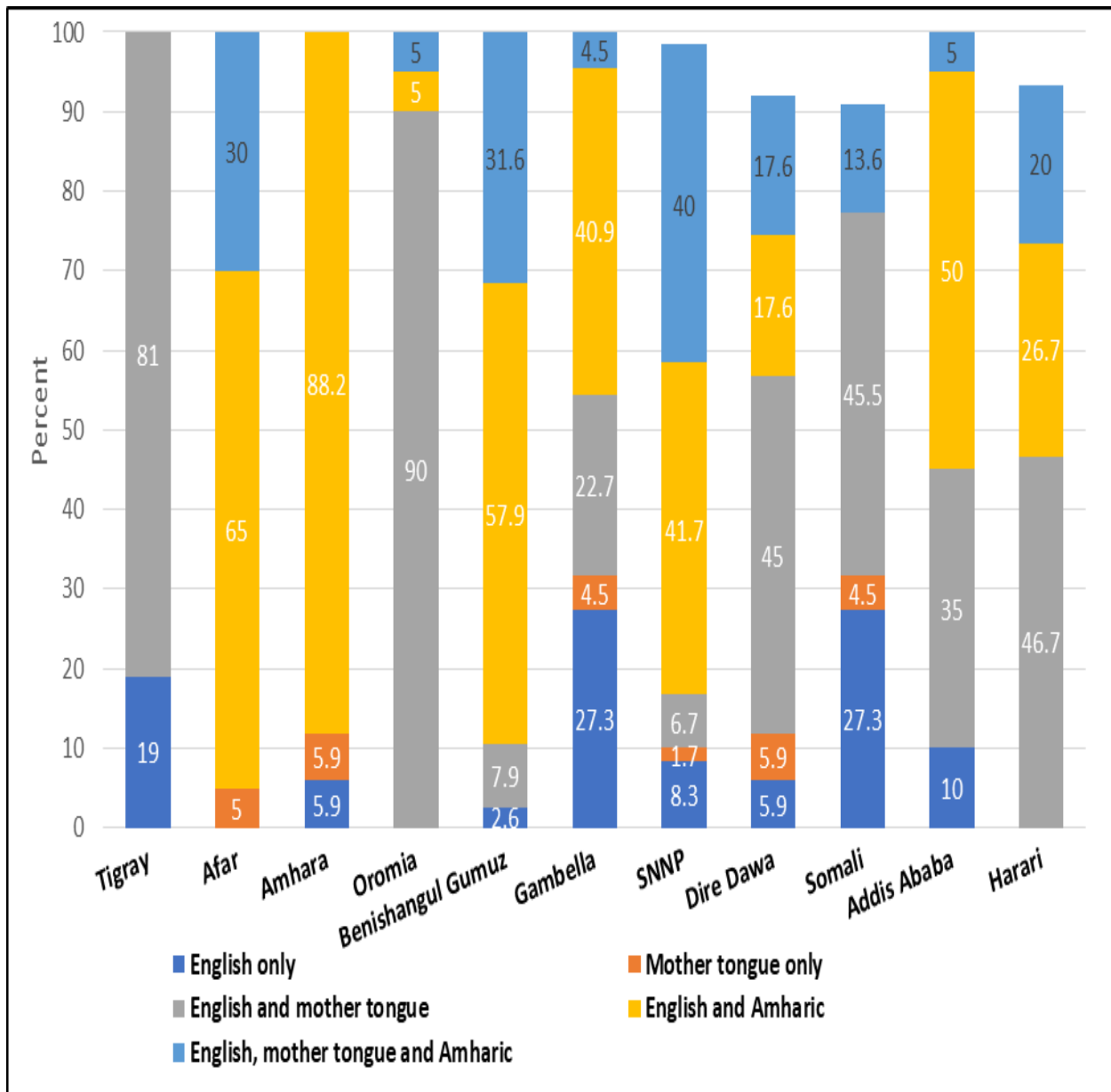
Teachers' Language Use while Teaching



As Figure 1 shows, 33.3% of non-language teachers used a combination of English and Amharic, and 30.4% used English and another mother tongue. Examination of the data by region reveals that the proportion of teachers who exclusively use English as the medium of instruction in all regions is small. As shown in figure 2 below, no teachers from Afar, Oromia, or Harari reported exclusively using English while teaching at the transition level. Relatively sizable proportions of teachers from Gambela, Somali, and Tigray exclusively used English at the transition grade level. On the other hand, 90.0%, 81.0%, 46.7%, and 45.5% of teachers from Oromia, Tigray, Harari, and Somali, respectively, used mother-tongue languages while teaching students at their transition grade level. Mixing English with Amharic during instruction was not a common practice in Tigray, Somali, and the Oromia Regional States.

Figure 2

Language Use of Teachers During Instruction, by region



Further examination of the data by transition level shows that using mixed languages during teaching is a common practice across all transition levels. For example, 65.6% of teachers teaching grade 9 and above reported that they use English and shift to a mother tongue when teaching non-language subjects. Moreover, 33.7% and 41.6% of grade 7 teachers indicated that they shift to the mother tongue and Amharic while teaching non-language subjects. Only 4.5% of grade 7, 10% of grade 5, and 15.6% of grade 9 teachers reported using English exclusively when teaching non-language subjects.

Table 1*Distribution of Language Use by Level of Transition*

Level of transition	What language do you use to teach your subject at this grade level?												Total	
	English only		MT only		English & MT		English & Amharic		English, MT, & Amharic		Non - response		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Grade 5	12	10.0	2	1.7	11	9.2	53	44.2	33	27.5	9	7.5	120	44.0
Grade 7	4	4.5	3	3.4	30	33.7	37	41.6	13	14.6	2	2.2	89	32.6
Grade 9	10	15.6	-	-	42	65.6	1	1.6	3	4.7	8	12.5	64	23.4
Total	26	9.5	5	1.8	83	30.4	91	33.3	49	17.9	19	7.0	273	100.0

Note. MT is mother tongue.

Teachers who participated in this study were asked about their colleagues' use of English during instruction. The study uncovered similar patterns of language use among non-language teachers as perceived by teachers who participated in the study. For example, 32.6% of teachers perceived that their colleagues who are teaching non-language subjects use English and shift to a mother tongue while teaching and 34.4% of the same respondents reported that their colleagues, teaching non-language subjects use English and Amharic. A significant proportion (19.8%) of the respondents indicated that their colleagues who are teaching non-language subjects also use a mix of three languages (English, a mother tongue, and Amharic).

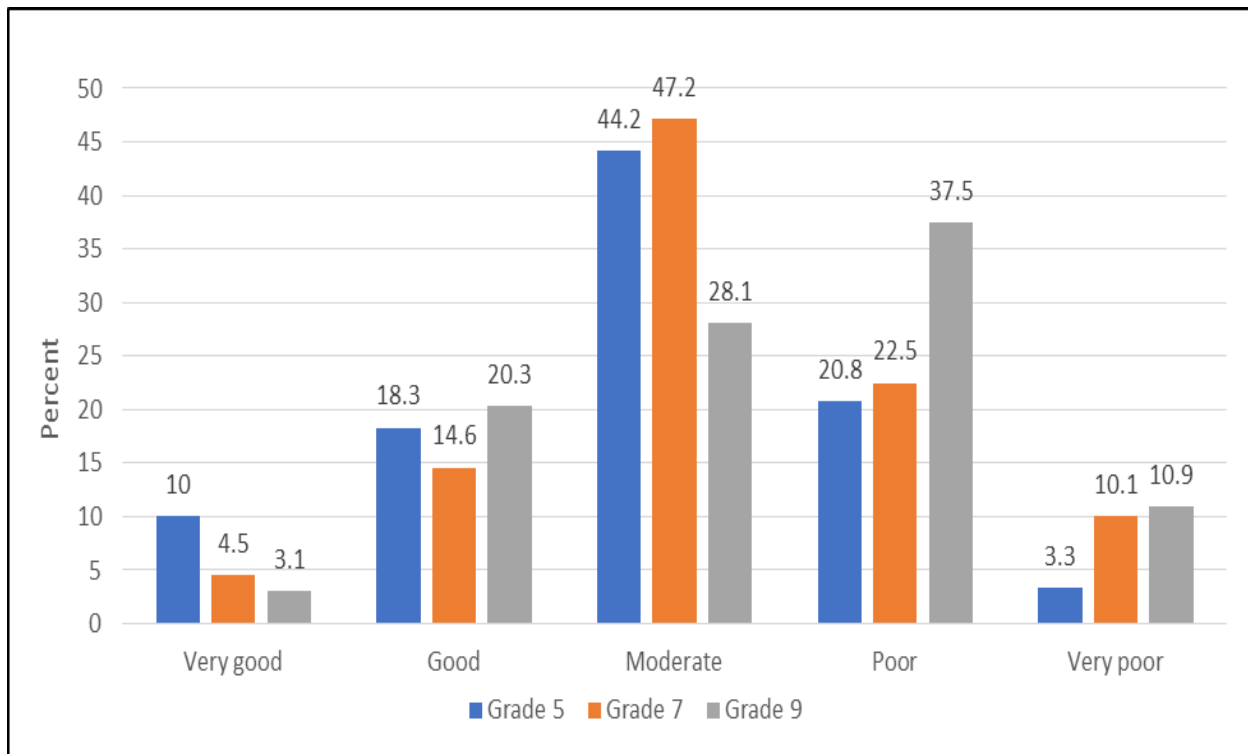
Teachers' use of English as the medium of instruction was also observed in 99 classrooms. The observations found that in 19 classrooms (4 in grade five, 1 in grade six, 12 in grade seven, and 2 in grade nine), i.e., in 19.2% of the classrooms observed, none of the teachers were using English while teaching non-language subjects. This is quite large compared to the 9.5% of non-users obtained from a self-report questionnaire. Moreover, in 46 classrooms (17 in grade five, 1 in grade six, 12 in grade seven, 1 in grade eight, and 15 in grade nine), teachers were using the English language rarely, while they used mother tongue languages predominantly. On the other hand, mixing English with other languages while teaching non-language subjects was common in 25 classrooms (10 in grade five, 7 in grade seven, and 8 in grade nine) out of all classrooms observed. Only in 32 classrooms (17 in grade five, 2 in grade six, 6 in grade seven, and 7 in grade nine) teachers were using English often while teaching non-language subjects. The average time teachers spent using English as the medium of instruction was 21.04 minutes, with a standard deviation of 12.57 minutes out of the total possible 40 minutes. The minimum and maximum time spent teaching in English were 0 minutes and 40 minutes, respectively.

Teachers' Perception of Students' Level of Understanding

As mentioned earlier, teachers' use of a mother tongue alongside English while teaching non-language subjects can be partly explained by their perception of students' increased understanding of subjects taught in English and their mother tongue. Figure 3 presents teachers' perception of their students' level of understanding of subject matter taught only in English.

Figure 3

Teachers' Perception of Students' Understanding of Subject matter Taught Only in English



When examined by level of transition, a larger proportion of teachers teaching in regions with a grade 5 transition judged their students' understanding as very good compared to teachers in grade 7 and grade 9 regions, and a larger proportion of teachers in grade 9 regions rated their students' understanding as "poor" compared to teachers in other regions. In a related question, teachers were asked to estimate the proportion of students in their class who could understand the subjects taught only in English. About 30.8% of the teachers estimated that less than 25% of their students understood, 37% estimated that 25–49% of their students understood, and only 1.5% estimated that 75% or more understood subjects taught in English. The data generally show that most teachers perceived the English language skill of their students as poor.

Analysis of Written Responses

The researchers analyzed the written responses of 607 students and found that 315 students out of 607 (51.9%) understood the first question ("How old are you?") and responded to it appropriately. The remaining 48.1% of students were unable to respond appropriately (disregarding any spelling errors). One of the inappropriate responses to the question was, "I am fine thank you." Of the students who answered appropriately, only slightly more than a quarter of students asked did not make any spelling errors (28.7% of the total 607 students). The proportion

of students by grade level that answered appropriately and without spelling mistakes was 16.8% for grade 5, 37% for grade 7, and 32.7% for grade 9.

Similarly, 288 students (47.4%) understood the question “What is your native language?” and responded appropriately, with or without spelling errors. The proportion of students who responded appropriately increased at higher grade levels—32.4% for grade five, 56.1% for grade seven, and 59.8% for grade nine. Only 15.5% of the total students (14.7% in grade 5, 12.6% in grade 7, and 24.3% in grade 9) responded to the question without grammatical and spelling errors.

The third question posed to children was, “How many school friends do you have?” The analysis of the written responses shows that 270 students (44.5%) understood the question and answered appropriately, with or without spelling errors. The majority of students (55.5%) did not respond appropriately. The proportion of students who answered the third question without errors was 17.5% (13.9% of fifth graders, 18.7% of seventh graders, and 22.4% of ninth graders).

The proportion of children who understood and answered all three questions with or without errors was 28.7%. Most of these students were in Somali Region, Addis Ababa, and Dire Dawa. Table 2 presents further details.

Table 2

The Proportion of Students Who Answered all Questions Correctly by Region

Region	N	%
Addis Ababa	64	50.0%
Afar	18	23.7%
Amhara	14	36.8%
Benishangul	1	1.8%
Dire Dawa	10	50.0%
Gambela	11	16.4%
Oromia	11	25.0%
SNNPR_Hadiya	10	23.8%
SNNPR_Sidama	7	16.7%
SNNPR_Wolayita	2	6.5%
Somali	15	68.2%
Tigray	10	24.4%
Total	174	28.7%

When examined by student grade level, 40.8% of seventh graders, 33.6% of ninth graders, and 13% of fifth graders answered the three questions appropriately, regardless of spelling or grammatical errors. Only 27 students (4.4%) gave three appropriate responses without errors. This result shows that most children who took this simple oral test have difficulty understanding even simple questions when presented in English. This implies that many students might have difficulty in learning subjects in English.

Students' Views on the Use of English as the Medium of Instruction

Students who participated in focus group discussions had mixed views on using English as the medium of instruction. Among those who had positive views, most raised points related to the usefulness of English for further education and for widening one's knowledge, understanding, and development of communication skills. Others, for example, FGD participants from Amhara, considered English an international language and believed that using it as a medium of instruction in schools helps students join the world community. There are students, for example, FGD participants from Addis Ababa, who believed that the use of the English medium of instruction allowed them to be more precise in what they learned because they have difficulty understanding some concepts and technical terms presented in mother tongue language. These students further indicated that the problem they encounter with the introduction of the English medium of instruction is short-lived. They can easily cope and start to comfortably learn in English. Students who participated in FGDs from Amhara also reflected a similar view and stated that the English medium of instruction enabled them to understand scientific concepts quickly.

In contrast, many students stated negative views about the use of English. Students who transitioned in grade 9, for example, argued that most of them do not understand English and the subjects taught in it and thus scored poorly on examinations. These negative views are attributed to three points. First, some believed that their poor performance in English and subjects taught in English was due to their weak background in English in lower grades. Second, others felt the teachers themselves could not communicate well in English, often switching to the mother tongue while teaching. For example, one of the students said, "there are teachers who cannot teach in English." Third, some students thought English was difficult simply because students neither try to communicate in English nor read materials written in English in other contexts. According to these students, even if teachers assisted them, students often score low, and this, in turn, discourages teachers.

On the other hand, most FGD participants argued that using mixed languages during instruction is not a luxury; it is instead a matter of following or not following their teachers. Students from Benishangul Gumuz, for example, stated, "Code shifting is meaningful as it helped us understand the concepts instead of knowing only the title of the subject." Other students from Sidama emphatically expressed that they would understand the lessons better and learn if there was code shifting. Students who participated in one of the FGDs conducted in the Sidama zone stated:

If we learn only in English, we cannot understand what is taught. How can one understand without translation? We understand what is taught in English if it is translated into our language or Amharic. Otherwise, more than 50% of the class may not follow the teacher and cannot understand what is taught.

Most students believe that a teacher who teaches only in English may not have attentive students in the class. The majority of students may not follow him/her. Students from Tigray also indicated that they have problems understanding the subjects taught in English only. They believe that translation to their mother tongue would help them learn better.

Analysis of Grade 10 National Examination Results

One of the research questions this study attempted to answer was ‘What, if any, is the difference in achievement between students who transit in early grades and those who transit in later grades?’ Accordingly, the study examined five years of national examination scores of grade 10 students. Table 3 presents the average performance of students of different transition levels. In all cases except for the 2015/16 academic year, the average performance of students who made the transition at grade 7 exceeded that of students who transitioned either at grade 5 or 9. The gap between the performance of students who transitioned at grade 5 and grade 7 decreased significantly in the 2014/15 academic year, and in 2015/16 the performance of students who made the transition at grade 5 exceeded those of students who transitioned at grade 7. The school environment, the socioeconomic conditions of parents, the training of teachers, and the situations where the teaching-learning process takes place are almost the same for all regions. Gaining experience in teaching in English and the longer time available for learners to develop English language skills may partly explain the difference. However, the performance of students who made the transition at grade 9 is significantly lower than those students who made the transition at grade 5 and 7 in almost all examination periods. The difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance. The different transition levels employed by regions may be one of the factors that may explain differences in achievement among students of different regional states and city administrations.

Table 3

The Distribution of Mean and Standard Deviation of Scores by Transition Level and Year

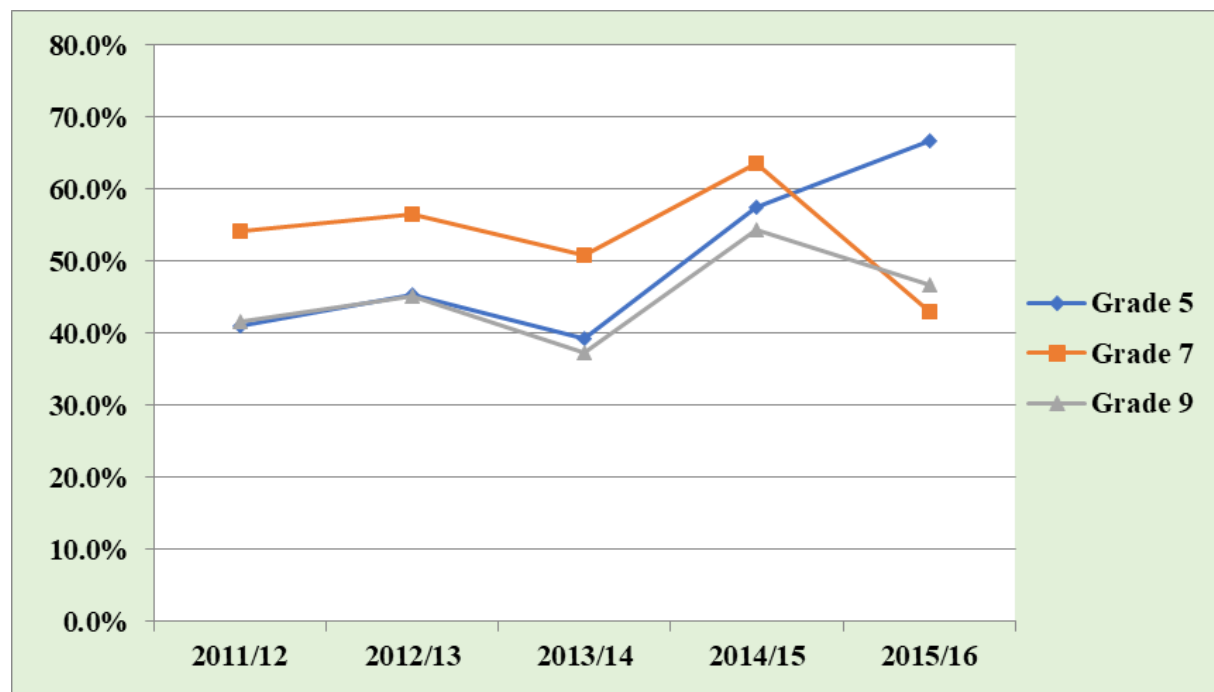
Transition Level	Year									
	2011/12		2012/13		2013/14		2014/15		2015/16	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Grade 5	1.88	0.550	1.96	0.561	1.87	0.595	2.10	0.612	2.24	0.600
Grade 7	2.08	0.622	2.15	0.642	2.06	0.676	2.22	0.657	1.88	0.498
Grade 9	1.89	0.577	1.97	0.598	1.84	0.643	2.08	0.658	1.95	0.555

Further analysis of the data by region shows similar results. Afar, Amhara, Harari, Addis Ababa, and Dire Dawa, as a group, performed significantly better than the other regions. However, the analysis also revealed statistically significant differences within levels of transition. As the data in Table 4 show, the performance of students in the Somali Region was found to be significantly better than that of students from Tigray and Oromia. Similarly, when we look at the grade 7 group, the performance of students from Dire Dawa city administration is consistently and significantly lower than other students from the same category for almost all periods. This within-group difference may show that it may not be the transition level but rather other unidentified factors that are important for explaining differences in achievement scores of grade 10 national examinations. In other words, the difference could be attributed to factors other than the transition level.

Table 4*The Distribution of Mean and Standard Deviation of Grade 10 Scores by Region and Year*

Regions	2011/12		2012/13		2013/14		2014/15		2015/16	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Tigray	1.87	0.555	2.00	0.590	1.81	0.638	1.97	0.651	1.65	0.452
Oromia	1.87	0.574	1.94	0.583	1.81	0.620	2.08	0.643	2.03	0.538
Somali	2.28	0.590	2.40	0.653	2.38	0.726	2.52	0.706	2.21	0.682
Afar	2.00	0.499	2.12	0.526	2.08	0.579	2.66	0.523	1.94	0.512
Amhara	2.10	0.626	2.15	0.647	2.06	0.678	2.21	0.661	1.84	0.479
Harari	2.19	0.636	2.31	0.675	2.19	0.683	2.30	0.724	1.89	0.556
Addis Ababa	2.06	0.607	2.16	0.622	2.09	0.671	2.26	0.623	2.16	0.523
Dire Dawa	1.68	0.559	1.77	0.571	1.94	0.592	2.11	0.583	1.94	0.513
Benishangul Gumuz	1.88	0.575	1.85	0.529	1.84	0.605	2.01	0.652	2.01	0.557
SNNPR	1.89	0.547	1.98	0.564	1.88	0.597	2.12	0.609	2.27	0.600
Gambela	1.74	0.542	1.74	0.482	1.59	0.470	1.86	0.553	1.90	0.488

Similarly, the performance of students from Gambela Regional State is consistently and significantly lower than that of others in the same transition level. The proportion of students who scored 2.0 and above was analyzed by the transition level. Figure 4 presents the results of the analysis.

Figure 4*The Proportion of Students Who Scored 2.0 and Above*

As Figure 4 shows, the proportion of students who scored 2.0 and above in four of the five examination periods is higher for students who made the transition at grade 7 than those who made the transition either at grade 5 or 9. On the other hand, the proportion of students who transitioned at grade 5 is significantly higher than students who transitioned in either grade 7 or 9 in the 2015/16 grade 10 national examination results. The pattern shows that the performance of students who transitioned at grade 5 began improving after the 2012/13 academic year and exceeded the performance of students who transitioned in grades 7 and 9 by 2015/16.

The analysis of letter grades for English subject by the level of transition also revealed similar results.

Table 5

Letter Grades for English Subject by Level of Transition

Year	Letter grade	Level of transition		
		Grade 5	Grade 7	Grade 9
2011/12	A	1.9%	4.2%	2.4%
	B	7.0%	10.9%	7.7%
	C	57.2%	58.0%	55.4%
	D	33.8%	26.8%	34.4%
	F	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%
2012/13	A	1.8%	3.9%	3.0%
	B	19.3%	25.0%	19.1%
	C	50.1%	48.5%	48.6%
	D	27.3%	21.7%	27.8%
	F	1.4%	0.8%	1.4%
2013/14	A	2.2%	4.4%	3.0%
	B	15.7%	21.1%	15.9%
	C	46.4%	45.8%	43.1%
	D	31.2%	25.3%	32.6%
	F	4.5%	3.3%	5.4%
2014/15	A	4.7%	7.5%	5.9%
	B	27.5%	32.2%	27.2%
	C	42.9%	40.1%	40.9%
	D	20.3%	16.5%	21.0%
	F	4.6%	3.6%	5.0%
2015/16	A	9.1%	2.1%	0.7%
	B	33.4%	6.5%	15.0%
	C	37.5%	53.1%	59.6%
	D	16.0%	38.1%	17.2%
	F	4.0%	0.2%	7.5%

The proportion of students who scored As and Bs in English is consistently higher for students who transitioned in grade 7 than those who transitioned either in grade 5 or grade 9 for all examination periods except 2015/16.

As described earlier, there is an apparent difference in the performance of students who transitioned from a mother-tongue language to English as a medium of instruction at different levels. Generally, students who made the transition in grade 7 were found to be superior in terms of achievement on grade 10 national examinations to those who transitioned either in grade 5 or 9. The performance of students who transitioned in grade 9 is consistently lower, even compared to those who transitioned in grade 5. Other factors remain similar (for example, teacher training, availability of materials, the skill of teachers, and the like) for all regions and city administrations; middle-grade transition (grade 7) can explain the better performance of students on grade 10 national examinations. The data also indicate that the performance of students who transitioned at grade 5 is improving. This finding is in congruence with the positive perception of teachers toward an early transition to English as a medium of instruction.

Students' Views about the Level of Transition

Students who participated in focus group discussions had mixed views on the transition to the English medium of instruction. For example, students in regions with a grade 5 transition felt that this early transition was better for their education. They mentioned that early transition helped them get more preparation time for regional and national examinations. Some even felt it would be helpful to transition earlier than grade 5. FGD participants in regions with a grade 7 transition stated, "Had the transition been earlier, those students who had difficulty in learning in English might have developed better understanding skills because of early exposure to the language." Others mentioned that transition at grade 4 or 5 would allow students to practice the language with their childhood mind setup and tacitly favored early transition. Students who participated in the FGDs from the Amhara region also favored early transition to the English medium of instruction.

Other FGD participants (e.g., students from Dire Dawa) expressed their view that if they properly learn all subjects in their mother tongue, even up to grade 8, they may not encounter problems understanding what is taught in English. According to these respondents, the issue is not about the transition level but what matters most is the competence of teachers to teach in mother tongue languages effectively. The participants of the FGDs believed that it is the responsibility of teachers to help students develop the required skill but they feel that the teachers themselves lack this skill.

In short, despite advancing different views about the transition to English, many appeared to support transition at an earlier grade. Among those students who transitioned at grade 5, many advocated for transition at an earlier grade. Among the students in regions with the transition at grade 7, there was a general preference for transition at grade 5 or earlier. Moreover, similarly, the students in regions with a grade 9 transition tended to cite the benefits of transitioning at grade 7 or earlier. For example, students from the Somali regional state who participated in the FGD stated, "It would be to our advantage if we learn the main subjects in English starting from grade seven. However, teachers' capacity to teach in English has to be enhanced."

Conclusions and Implications

Ideally, the transition to a second language should be preceded by readiness from the users' side in the language of the medium of instruction. Although teachers were expected to use exclusively English as the medium of instruction after transition, most teachers failed to use English while teaching non-language subjects in all transition levels exclusively. Shifting from English to mother-tongue or Amharic was a prevalent practice in most classrooms. The education and training policy of the country clearly states English as the medium of instruction beyond grade 8. However, only about 16 percent of the teachers teaching in grade 9 were exclusively using English to teach subjects other than languages. All others were using mixed English with mother tongue languages while teaching non-mother tongue subjects.

Students also admitted that they have difficulty learning English subjects and believe that their teachers have difficulty using English for teaching. Teachers also believe that students have difficulty understanding what is taught in English. This lack of readiness to learn in English is in contrary to the way they consider English as the language of science and technology, a language that facilitates future career development, and a language of success. However, despite their problem with learning in English, most of these students still prefer an early transition to English, assuming that they will benefit from an early transition in their future learning and career development.

Generally, students who made the transition at grade 7 appeared to be better in terms of achievement on grade 10 national examinations than those who transitioned either at grade 5 or 9 in four of the five examination periods. The performance of students who transitioned at grade 9 appeared to be consistently lower, even compared to those who transitioned at grade 5. This result shows that early transition appeared to be an advantage for students.

The results of this study have far-reaching implications for major stakeholders. In this regard, regional states and city administrations should think about strategies to improve the English language skills of primary school teachers and should encourage teachers to use English during classroom instruction. Furthermore, special attention should be given to the training of teachers who are supposed to use English as a medium of instruction.

The Ministry of Education (MoE), in collaboration with the regional state education bureaus and city administration education bureaus, should also conduct more in-depth research about the use of the mother tongue and the transition grade level to English as the medium of instruction and students' readiness to learn in English. Further investigation of the effects of the three points of transition on students' levels of achievement would be beneficial for decision-making and policy dialogue.

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