

Does Instruction through Mother Tongue Impede Students' English Proficiency? Public Skepticism on the Instructional Language Policy in the State of Amhara

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Abstract: This study examined whether learning in the mother tongue affects students' English proficiency in the State of Amhara. It also explores experiences across the world to look for possible means of equipping students with the required competences of English. The study depended on a review of literature and documentary examination. It has employed the content analysis method of the qualitative approach. Findings revealed that instruction through mother tongue *per se* does not impede the acquisition of English proficiency nor does the use of English as medium of instruction necessarily improve pupils' English proficiency. Rather, lack of carrying out valid instructional language planning, government reluctance to consult necessary stakeholders during policy formulation and poor implementation procedures have resulted in lack of realizing the intended goals of the instructional language policy. Apart from lack of resource supply the defects in its formulation procedure have lingering effects on the realization of instructional language policy. In general, although many scholars of the field have labeled the current policy as one of the best instructional language policies formulated in Ethiopia so far, the irregularities and inconsistencies in its practice hindered to meet the intentions advocated from the outset. Consequently, the implementation of instruction through the mother tongue, like similar interventions by previous governments, has been a matter of political expediency rather than a well thought out and planned reform. Hence, since the future is today, employing a contextually sound instructional language policy alleviates the challenges pupils face in their English proficiency and ultimately helps them compete in the prevailing globalizing socio-economic world.

Key words: English proficiency, instructional language policy, instruction through the mother tongue, language of instruction, English acquisition

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Rationale for Instruction through Mother Tongue

The quest for instruction through mother tongue (IMT) is based on four fundamental grounds (Mazaba & Nthepe, 1979; Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2001). The first is the need to maintain the linguistic diversity of the global linguistic ecology. That is because losing any one of the languages in the world is seen as minimizing the cultural and linguistic diversity of our globe. In view of this value, any language should be protected from the danger of extinction because all languages by themselves are sources of knowledge. The second one is related to the human rights issue according to which linguistic rights are considered as the major parts of human rights. In this regard, all human beings deserve the right of using the language that they prefer for their day-to-day communication. The third value lies on the relationship between language and identity. This value refers to the function of language as a symbol of identity whereby the mother tongue (MT) is taken as an ancestor for and a closely interwoven language with the culture and tradition of a community that affirms its identity, self-image, efficacy, and a sense of independence. The last and the major rationale for IMT is the pedagogical and psycholinguistic role by which the education and thought of a child is influenced or determined. That is, since MT is the language children know best, it is not contested that they do best in their MTs (Bell, 2003; Mazaba & Nthepe, 1979).

Among the theoretical grounds mentioned above, the focus of this paper is on the pedagogical and psychological role of IMT. While emphasizing the need for MT in educational instruction, many scholars of the field define medium of instruction (MoI) (both in the spoken and written form) as the prime important factor in the teaching and learning process without which knowledge and skills cannot be transferred easily. To indicate the indispensable role of language in education, Wolff (2003, p.5) has stated that “language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education.” Brimer and Pauli (1971, p.99) also pointed out that “given that the child is fit, and well, the gravest handicap that he [/she] can suffer in schools is to be unfamiliar with the language of instruction.” Many writers (e.g Corson, 1990; Mazaba & Nthepe, 1979; McNab, 1989; Unchendu, 1993; Wet & Niemann, 1999) argue that the overall cognitive development of human beings is tightly interrelated with the development of language skills because language is a crucial means of gaining access to information, i.e. relevant knowledge, skills and power. The use of a language that a child or a student cannot speak and listen in a classroom instruction, in contrast, creates cognitive and pedagogical problems on the child.

According to Spolsky (1975), language is the key to the cognitive development of people and can either promote or impede pupils’ scholastic competence and the consequent socio-economic success. For Spolsky, protecting children from being instructed using non-MT language, particularly, at their early educational level, is an indispensable measure in determining their educational success and general buildup of their personality in the long run. Correspondingly, instructional language policy (ILP) is a determining factor of pupils’ educational achievement (Corson, 1990; Spolsky, 1975; Seidel & Moritz, 2009). If a pupil is not

able to understand by hearing what the teacher says and by reading what is written on his/her book, it is hardly possible to conclude that an effective teaching and learning activity is carried out. Therefore, the initial problem that a child faces while entering a school is the alien language used in that school because the language employed as a MoI enables him/her to master neither the subject matter nor the new language itself. On this basis, educators such as Fafunwa, Macualety and Funaso (1989) and Rubagumya (2000) fervently advise that there should not be a discrepancy between the home language and school language for children who are beginning education. According to these sources, using the MT as an MoI is the best alternative for children to easily acquire knowledge as well as adjust themselves to the new school environment as easily as possible.

According to Kembo-Sure (as cited in Amlaku, 2008) there are opponents who argue against IMT based on economic, educational, socio-political and linguistic perspectives. Besides Kembo-Sure (2007), other scholars of the field (e.g. Adegbija, 1994; Fasold, 1990; Rubagumya, 2000) advise that, apart from ensuring pedagogical and psychological values, drawing a language policy should take into consideration minority rights, the economic utility of the language, national integrity, government efficiency, individual and group identity as well as different aesthetic values.

According to Fowler (2000), nevertheless, perspectives of educational policy that reveal the presence of four competing theoretical frameworks to explain a policy problem help to lens whether to introduce MT in educational instruction. Among them these frameworks, competing values perspective is preferable to assess policy problems such as the one under discussion. In line with this, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) (1994), considered equity, quality, relevance and access – all included in Fowler's (2000) competing values theoretical framework of educational policy – as the pillars of the policy framework on which the foundation of the current education and training policy is built. In addition, according to TGE (1994), all the three categories of the competing values (self-interest values, general social values, and democratic values) are inherent in the ILP under discussion. In other words, the issue of MoI is a reflection of all types of values stated under the competing values.

With regard to self-interest values implementing the MT as an MoI paves the way for beneficiaries toward socio-economic development. Children instructed through their MTs more likely get better opportunities in their education than those children who learn via non-MT instruction (Brimer & Pauli, 1971; Seidel & Moritz, 2009). IMT, therefore, caters improvement in the equity, quality and efficiency of education and widens the chance of equal access of employment opportunities among citizens and their economic benefits thereafter (ADEA, 2001; Seidel & Moritz, 2009; Spolsky, 1975). In other words, more members of a specific ethnic group will face less competition from the outside and hence can have wider opportunity of employment in their respective localities on occupations that require the use of the local language. By enhancing English language proficiency, IMT may also widen the national and global competitiveness of such students both in their academic and job careers. This is meant better chance of economic involvement and improved productivity due to adequate knowledge and

skills acquired. As a result of the policy, therefore, such a category of communities may enjoy more power than could have been otherwise.

ILP also reflects the general social values (Corson, 1990; Seidel & Moritz, 2009; Spolsky, 1975). For instance, by reducing dropout rates and repetition rates on the one hand and by improving students' completion rates and achievements on the other, the implementation of IMT has the opportunity to bring down unemployment and food insecurity. This, in turn, may contribute to the efforts that have been made to maximize peace and order in the school environment.

The implications of the policy on democratic values may have multifaceted characteristics (Birkland, 2015; Fowler, 2000). That is, IMT is a reflection of freedom and self-reliance because it keeps away the burdens of an alien language and its consequences. According to Fowler, IMT is also a reflection of freedom because it enables to get a good education regardless of language differences, although such differences among individuals as hard work, effort, endurance, etc., can create disparities on conditions where equal opportunities already exist. IMT is also expected to create equal recognition and respect with a subsequent sense of fraternity and integrity among the different nationalities all with their own languages.

The Global Position of English and Its Implication to Schooling

In order to understand the merits and demerits of IMT, it is necessary to place it in a global perspective and the globalization effect. That is, in our contemporary world countries seem to be closer and dependent on each other because of the ease created by modern technology and communication (Giddens, 2000; Todorova & Todorova, 2018). This, according to Todorova and Todorova (2018), is because our world is steadily changing more than ever before and the process of this change is being accompanied by the globalization system that has multidimensional implications including in the language environment. In favor of this, Acedo, Adams and Popa (2012) noted that changes in the global language environment, inevitably, affect the language policies of nations. Globalization has brought about, among other things, the need for proficiency in English language, a language that has been with unprecedented expansion and prestige across the globe (Todorova & Todorova, 2018). That is likely why the dominance of English is being widely reflected these days in every aspect of human lives worldwide. Acedo et al. (2012) in this respect further stated the following: "A world language, usually English, is often seen as one key to education quality in a globalizing society and is often viewed as a requisite to advanced education." (p. 201).

Nearly a decade and half ago, Chang (2006) spelled out that more than 75 countries across the world had officially recognized English as their primary or secondary language six and seven years before then. According to Chang, the number of speakers of English as their first or second language among those countries had reached about 2.2 billion, making up nearly a third of the world's population. She also adds that English has become the main language of satellite broadcasting, computer system, popular music, advertising, and video games. It is, she insists, the language of international air traffic communication and has increasingly been used in

international maritime, policing and emergency services. Moreover, Chang expounds that English is used so extensively in the academic, scientific and technological sectors whereby over 80% of all information is stored in electronic retrieval systems in it. By noting related evidence, she also confirms that over 90% of information exchange on the internet across the world is conducted in English.

Similarly, Bamgbose (2001) and Kirkgöz (2008) inform that English is steadily becoming a dominant language in the world as globalization comes to be universally accepted in both political (diplomatic) and academic discourses. Based on the survey he made on 20 countries regarding the utility of English, Bamgbose (2001) further demonstrates that various communications everywhere (be it in large scale businesses, industries, technologies, banking, international conferences, or others) in our globe are dominantly conducted in English, no matter its disruption on the already established local languages, cultures and identities. In addition, Bottery (2000) and Chang (2006) underlined that the development of globalization is attributable to the power and dominance of English language. Chang (2006), particularly emphasizes that globalization is playing pivotal roles in strengthening the position of English as a global language. Tsui and Tollefson (2007), in a similar vein, maintain that technology and English are the two inseparable tools that have been stirring up globalization further. To respond to the rapid changes brought about by globalization, according to them, countries across the world have been trying to ensure that their citizens are adequately equipped with these two skills.

Furthermore, Block and Cameron (2002) as well as Todorova and Todorova (2018) make obvious that the recent undertakings and new changes in the world economy and the new means of communication thereon are providing new impetuses to the growth of global English. That is, according to them, more business activities successfully cross the borders of more nations and more activities that go beyond local areas. More people are able to reach others in distant countries and maintain regular contact with the help of modern means of communication. Such international activities and global communications require a shared global language. This language is in most cases English, which is spreading faster and wider than ever before. Hence, it can be said that the development of globalization has been associated with the dominance of English. It can also be argued that globalization has been functioning as a driving force to strengthen the position of English as a global language (Bamgbose, 2003; Bottery, 2000).

Despite the presence of some controversial arguments (Birdsall, 2006; Friedman, 2007), these days, it is not that difficult to understand how the power and influence of English is widely felt in the context of globalization. It has almost gone to be an international language that every nation across the globe has chosen it as a language of instruction (LoI). Nations do so to well-acquaint their citizens with the language in order to effectively take part in the steadily narrowing down and competitive contemporary world environment. Accordingly, today ILP should not be seen separately from the challenges and opportunities of the globalization of the language environment (Cha, 2007; Mair, 2003; Qi, 2009; Shohamy, 2006).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ethiopia is one of the countries that gives due emphasis for English proficiency among its citizens, particularly of students (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2015). English proficiency has become a necessity in the country not only as an MoI in schools but also as a language of external relations, diplomacy and business (TGE, 1994). Consequently, the importance of English proficiency as a stepping-stone for competence in other school subjects cannot be denied.

The question, however, lies on how to equip students with adequate proficiency of the language. Whether to provide all courses in English as early as possible improves proficiency in the language is disputing. Whether IMT hinders the possibility of acquiring English proficiency by pupils is also arguable among all the society. If IMT is advisable, besides, for how long shall it be utilized so that pupils may not face challenges to communicate in English has been controversial. Similarly, the grade level that English shall be introduced as a subject has also been dubious. Given that equipping students with the required knowledge in their entire education in general and in their second language acquisition in particular is everybody's intention, lack of public awareness and trust on the merits of IMT has been a bone of contention among elites and educators in Ethiopia with its own far-reaching implications and consequences. In this respect Heugh, Benson, Berhanu and Mekonnen (2007) have discussed with parents and other community members in the State of Amhara. They have come across most parents favoring English an MoI in the second cycle primary, particularly grades seven and eight. One justification provided was the availability of supplementary educational materials that they thought could at least partially compensate the difficulty of using English as an MoI, despite the fact that it is unlikely that many students and teachers can afford to buy those materials in reality. Heugh et al (2007) also found out parents who argued that delivering education through medium of English provides both students and teachers with an opportunity of better English exercise than could have been through IMT. However, they feel that it is unlikely that this benefits more than few do. These authors also inform that parents (particularly, the elite) favored the introduction of English medium at earlier classes of the second cycle primary so that it can prepare students for their English medium in their future schooling. As a result, they are told to have forced the government to switch off the medium into English at grade seven. A translation of the official statement of the State of Amhara Cabinet in 2005 by Heugh et al. verifies the situation more clearly. The statement stipulates that "although we believe that using the MT is correct and appropriate, because there are pressures from the society, we are forced to use English and Amharic in Grades 7 and 8" (p. 63). This implies that public skepticism and the consequent pressure have forced the government of Amhara to violate the ILP in primary education where the government has limited IMT to the first four or six years and switched off the LoI to English as early as grade seven. In other words, the government has surrendered to the pressure of the public who inappropriately felt that IMT impedes pupils' English proficiency and, in contrast, instruction of all courses in English helps to improve the skills of English by their children.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to investigate whether IMT affects students' English proficiency. It also explores experiences across the world to suggest possible means to equip students with the required competences of English without sacrificing the benefits of IMT. Taking into account the impact of English proficiency on the future academic and career development of students, this paper also examines how the ILP responded to the increased imperative of English as a global language in the State of Amhara. The analyses, moreover, benchmarks empirical evidence that inform the right relationship between IMT and second language (English) acquisition. The following specific objectives spearheaded the exploration exercise:

- i. To investigate whether IMT impedes the acquisition of English proficiency;
- ii. To explore whether employing English as a MoI improves English proficiency;
- iii. To pin down mechanisms that help to equip students with better English proficiency;
- iv. To examine whether the formulation process of ILP affected its output.

METHOD

This study is based on a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of different materials towards identifying particular patterns, themes or biases regarding the problem under investigation. Prior research works and issues related to the ILP and its practice are taken into consideration to guide the content analysis. Accordingly, relevant documents (directives, guidelines, proclamations, etc.) prepared by both the regional education bureau and the regional government, annual reports of the regional education bureau and teacher education colleges as well as their practices and the challenges faced through were systematically summarized, examined, analyzed and verified so that valid inferences are drawn from the texts eventually. The researcher's closer observations and experiences in the last two decades or more, both as a teacher at secondary and higher education institutions and as an expert and head of office at zonal and regional offices of the education sector, highly helped to analyze data regarding both policy issues and their practices from different perspectives so as to ultimately gauge the practices of the ILP as well as draw sound conclusion and implications. To that effect, the study employed a qualitative method with particular emphasis on content analysis, a method which scholars of the field such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) and Patton (2002) propose for studies like the one under operation.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Relationship between Instruction through Mother Tongue and English Proficiency

The benefit of IMT is not limited to its pedagogical aspects. Unlike the imagination of many, it also facilitates the second language acquisition of students more than could have been achieved by using only the second language itself as an MoI. Different scholars of the field (e.g. Heugh et al., 2007; Kheirabadi, 2015; Nicholls & Van Hees, 2008) contend that learners who maintain their first language and continue to develop it generally achieve better in their second language

acquisition than learners who do not maintain their first language. In this respect Kheirabadi (2015, p. 81) justifies that “one of the important assumptions ... is that skills and knowledge learned in first language mother tongue transfer to second language L2.” Moreover, Yared (2017, p. 1), whose study has been conducted in the Ethiopian context, complements that “...students taught in their mother tongue first learn in English better after they transition to English-instruction classrooms.” Therefore, it is highly essential to support and encourage the use of a learners’ home language for effectively learning another or a new language. Other authorities who studied the relationship between IMT and second language acquisition (e.g. Dutcher & Tucker, 1995; Kayaoğlu, 2011; Madriñan, 2014; Soppio, 2018; Stoddart as cited in Berhanu, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Yadav, 2014; Yared, 2017) support the same position. All those authors argue that use of the MT instead of the second language as an MoI helps students not only to create a better opportunity to understand other subject matters but also to enhance their second language acquisition.

In general, there are different study reports that prove the direct interdependence of home language and second language proficiency. Nicholls and Van Hees (2008), Patel (2012) and Simanu-Klutz (1999), for instance, state that most research findings insist the use of MT in classroom instruction because besides its pedagogical and psychological benefits MT has the power of facilitating second language learning. Thomas and Collier (1997), in the same vein, demonstrated that allowing pupils to continue to develop their first language and establishing a strong foundation in their MT is the best and most effective mechanism not only for their overall achievement but to learn English more easily as well. Brice and Roseberry-McKibbin (n. d., p.11) also support the same opinion by stating that “the native or home language is the best medium for working with children and adds to the child’s ability to communicate in the second language.”

In line with this, studies conducted in Nigeria (e.g. Kembo-Sure, 2007; Oluwole, 2008) to compare the performances of children in bilingual programs with that of children in English medium showed that children from true bilingual programs performed better in their English language proficiency than those from the English medium program. In addition, those studies showed that the implementation of the MT for instruction is effective not only as an MoI but also as one of the better ways in the acquisition of second languages. Above all, both studies demonstrated that on the one hand local languages are suitable for teaching any subject (including science and math) and on the other that the teaching and using of MT as an MoI delays acquisition of second language proficiency.

Another experimental research carried out in South Africa by Posel and Zeller (2010) also indicated the presence of a strong relationship between the proficiencies in African languages and English language. According to Heugh (2003), another longitudinal study conducted in South Africa, from 1955-1975, on African language speaking students that had eight years of IMT followed by transition to English medium showed that the overall pass rate at the end of secondary education had raised to 83.7% in 1976, and pass rate in the English subject reached to 78% in 1978. However, when the number of years of IMT decreased from eight to

four years as of 1977, it was followed by a serious achievement drop across all subjects in general and in the English subject in particular at grade 12 achievement of students.

According to all research findings conducted both in Africa and outside, in general, schools supplied with better resources (teachers and curricular materials) that implemented MT for a longer time plus very good teaching method of English before it is implemented as an MoI are those whose students more likely achieve better both in their second language acquisition and in the entire learning outcomes (Heugh, Benson, Berhanu & Mekonnen, 2007). Studies carried out in South Africa, Guinea, and Somalia in the 1970s are good examples in this respect. According to those studies, eight years of IMT suffices for students to be able to make the transition to English even under low-resource school conditions. A recent study carried out by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) that offers the most up-to-date analysis regarding ILP also advocated that late exit from IMT has lasting general educational achievement and second language competence among the majority of pupils anywhere in the world (Alidou et al., 2006).

Employing Second Language as a Medium of Instruction and Its Role in the Acquisition of Proficiency in It

There are various studies (e.g. Alidou et al., 2006; Madrinan, 2014; Tavakoli & Jones, 2018) which inform that employment of a second language as an MoI does not necessarily improve proficiency in that language. Neither does early transition to a second language MoI necessarily improve second language proficiency among students. For instance, studies undertaken in well-resourced schools of USA (with well trained and competent teachers, small class sizes, and students with adequate learning materials) revealed that second language learners did not succeed in their English proficiency due to early transition to English medium (Alidou et al., 2006). As per this study students who outperformed and achieved better at early grades were those who were instructed in MTs for longer time, i.e. at least for six or seven years. Such achievements by themselves were secured when the instruction was accompanied by an effective teaching of the second language as a subject with well trained and specialized English teachers and backed by adequate learning materials such as textbooks. According to the same study, students instructed through their MTs in Africa (which holds true in our case too) were not successful in a similar way because they were not supplied with necessary resources.

Tekeste (2006), one of the ardent critiques of Ethiopian education policies, in this respect, strongly criticizes the use of English as an MoI in primary schooling. According to him, lack of English proficiency among Ethiopian teachers is one of the major bottlenecks for the defects of the education quality. He boldly insists avoiding the use of English as a MoI in the upper primary level, i.e. grades seven and eight, in Ethiopia. Consistently, based on the arguments of different scholars, Heugh et al. (2007) contend that there exists no direct and strong relationship between using a second language as an MoI and acquisition of proficiency in that language. Heugh et al. have also verified that the implementation of English as an MoI in the African linguistic set up,

where English is in most cases limited to school use, does not facilitate the acquisition and competence of English language by the students.

The national assessments conducted by NEAEA (2016) to evaluate student performances in Ethiopia also supported this generalization. According to the assessment result (NEAEA as cited in Heugh et al., 2007; NEAEA, 2016) there was only a slight difference in the English language achievement among grades seven and eight students who were taught in English and others taught through their MTs. This tells us that the use of English as an MoI may not bring about a significant difference on the English language achievement of students. The result of the assessment is also a sort of testimony that can disprove the assumption of many parents and elites who argue that the utilization of English as an MoI improves the English language proficiency of students.

Means of Equipping Students with Better English Proficiency

Learning assessment results conducted both at regional and national levels inform that English proficiency among students of all grade levels in Ethiopia has been much less than the expectations or the minimum standards required. For instance, a survey conducted before two decades by Stoddart (as cited in Berhanu, 2009) on the English language ability of students in Ethiopia, indicated that most students highly lack English proficiency. He mentioned that they could not understand what they heard from their teachers nor could they read from their textbooks, let alone to actively take part in classroom discussions or write and comprehend in English. Besides, he disclosed that the quality of teaching and learning in most schools had been adversely affected due to lack of English competence among students. On this basis the author condemned English in such a way that it should be called a medium of obstruction rather than of instruction. Amlaku (2008), Dendir (as cited in Heugh, Benson, Berhanu & Mekonnen, 2007), Lemlem (2010) and MoE (2015) share Stoddart's concern. A study conducted on early grade reading competence by USAID (2010), in the same line, revealed students' deficiency in their English proficiency across the country. The findings of an assessment conducted by the Bureau of Education (BoE) of the State of Amhara focusing on grades six and eleven students (BoE, 2016), consistently, revealed that the achievement of students was below the requirement (50%) in all subjects with serious problems in English, science and mathematics subjects.

While launching its English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) as part of the general Teacher Development Program by 2002, MoE had disclosed that deficiency in English language proficiency among students in Ethiopia is an unresolved problem. McLaughlin states that "it was hoped that with this policy [the 1994 Education and Training Policy] the standard of English in Ethiopia would improve rapidly alongside the expansion of education and educational opportunity. Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case" (2007, p. 1). A survey study conducted by Jeylan et al., (2010) has also reported that ELIP has failed to meet its expectations. That means a big investment made on ELIP with an attempt to improve the English proficiency of teachers and equip their students with improved English skills did not realize the intended changes.

Many other research reports (e.g. Abebayehu & Endashaw, 2009; Abraham, 2008; Adugna, 2008; Anteneh, 2011; Berhanu, 2009; Heugh et al., 2007; NEAEA, 2016; Tekeste, 1996) demonstrate that there has hitherto been a sharp decline in the English proficiency among both students and teachers in Ethiopia. Therefore, although the policy intention was to equip students with the necessary skills of English, lack of proficiency in the necessary language skills among students has become one of the formidable challenges with long lasting impact on the quality of the entire education system in the country.

Different research reports specify different measures to be taken in order to effectively employ an MT as an MoI and acquire proficiency in a second language that is going to be an MoI in higher levels of education (just like English in this case). For example, according to Escamilla and Grassi, (2000) and Nicholls and Van Hees (2008), teaching of the MT as a subject and using it as an MoI is advised to be implemented for at least eight years in multilingual settings like that of Ethiopia. It can, of course, be lowered down to six years on conditions where there are much resource supply and smaller class sizes. This is because six or eight years of instruction through MT are thought pedagogically wise in addressing the problems of equity, quality and access for education as well as the problems of second language acquisition among students (Ball, 2011; Nicholls & Van Hees, 2008). Unlike the government of Amhara that switched off IMT in second cycle primary to remedy the quality problem of education (Heugh et al., 2007), global evidence show that implementing the bilingual education approach instead of English as an MoI is also a wise, if not best, alternative to improve the English language proficiency of students (Ball, 2011; Benson, n. d.; Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, n. d.; Fishman, 1982; Hu, 2008; Krashen, n. d.; Leon, 2008; Malone, 2007; Nicholls & Van Hees, 2008; Posel & Zeller, 2010; Simanu-Klutz, 1999; Stroud, 2002).

Heugh et al. (2007) have pointed out the time when to introduce English both as a subject and as an MoI. They have suggested that to provide students with the best opportunity of English language acquisition the language shall be introduced as a subject not earlier than six years before the end of secondary schooling. If teachers are adequately prepared, in fact, it could be introduced as a subject earlier. Moreover, late beginning of a second language as a subject maximizes efficiency in the system.

Overall, a careful examination of the models of language education in Africa informs that there are mechanisms to equip students with the required knowledge in their second language acquisition (Escamilla & Grassi, 2000; Heugh, Benson, Berhanu & Mekonnen, 2007; Nicholls & Van Hees, 2008): (a) under school conditions of well-resourced and professionally and methodologically proficient teacher supply six years of IMT and then transition to a second language education is effective; (b) under conditions where teachers are equipped with the required competencies eight years of IMT and transition to a second language can bring about the required success in Africa in less-resourced schools; (c) in schools where both languages are used by students in the local community and where there are students from the two different language backgrounds in a classroom, IMT throughout primary schooling followed by bilingual MoI can be implemented to facilitate the pace of second language acquisition; and (d) in very

well-resourced (both material and teacher supply) schools IMT throughout primary and secondary education and then teaching of the second language as a subject is considered as the best approach to prepare students for higher education. This is supposed to enable them to use the international language as an MoI in their future education career.

In this regard, problem of delivering competent language teachers is a primary issue. All language teachers must be competent enough in the language they teach or the medium they use. That is, their competence both on professional qualification and methodology of teaching in the LoI should be ensured. They also need to develop their cognitive capacity to understand the content of the curriculum and how to teach that content through a specific language. In addition, since it has its own indispensable roles to play in the effectiveness of second language acquisition the availability of adequate and appropriate material resources is essential. Moreover, bringing the class size down to the standard required, curriculum revision, better funding, and conducting research and development activities have vital contributions.

In fact, according to Kembo-Sure (2007), the practice of LoI is so pervasive in our everyday life because everyone feels an expert in its application and makes its management and persuasion of the speakers more difficult. In other words, according to Kembo-Sure, the whole process of ILP is not an easy task at all because what makes good sense to linguists does not necessarily make sense to laymen and particularly to political leaders. The involvement of necessary actors should, still, in no way be overlooked for fear of such challenges because the invaluable contributions of stakeholders throughout the process are expected to materialize ILP. To close the space for public echoes (sometimes galvanized by mere political interests) and power that may shake and reverse policies set following the right procedure a knowledge-based, transparent, reliable and feasible decision that is bound by appropriate procedure of policy formulation need be in place. To overturn the bad perceptions and images created among the public and reintroduce IMT to eventually harvest and illuminate its potential benefits, the government shall involve all necessary stakeholders on the debate of ILP.

Repercussions of the Policy Formulation Procedure

After the *dergue* regime was toppled down in 1991, one of the measures the current government of Ethiopia took was to replace old policies of all sectors with new ones. One of them is the education and training policy introduced in 1994 (TGE, 1994). According to TGE, LoI is one of the key pillars given a due emphasis in the policy. The following articles demonstrate how much emphasis the government provided for MoI (TGE, 1994). On article 3.5.3, the policy has rightly declared that primary education and teacher training for kindergarten and primary schools will be given in nationality languages. On article 3.5.5, it has stated that English will be the MoI for secondary and tertiary education all over the country. On article 3.5.7, it has expressed that English shall be delivered as one subject as early as grade one in the schooling system of the entire country.

In view of the empirical evidence revised so far (e.g. Hu, 2008; Krashen, n. d.; Leon, 2008; Malone, 2007; Nicholls & Van Hees, 2008; Posel & Zeller, 2010; Simanu-Klutz, 1999;

Stroud, 2002), the ILP of Ethiopia sounds good and worthwhile. That is because the assumption of the policy seems to gear towards high-level proficiency in both local and English languages among students. By equipping young school leavers with adequate language proficiency of self-reliance for wider and better communication, seemingly, the policy intends to ensure better academic achievement and more competitiveness.

Theoretically, this is in congruence with the recommendations of different scholars (such as Bhushan, 2010; Carless, 2008; Corson, 1990; Fafunwa et al., 1989; Rubagumya, 2000) who dealt with LoI and have hitherto been arguing that ILP shall give priority for pedagogical elements. According to Ayalew (as cited in Daniel & Ababayehu, 2006), Seyum (1996) and Tekeste, (1996), no matter whether the initiative has been triggered by political motives, the current government of Ethiopia seems to have given adequate attention for LoI. Despite their concern on the match of practices with the actual policy declarations, according to Berhanu (2009) and Heugh, Benson, Berhanu and Mekonnen (2007), many scholars of the field have labeled this policy as one of the best ILPs formulated in Ethiopia so far.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that designing a sound policy is not an end by itself. It is only when the policy is properly implemented that its effectiveness is realized (Birkland, 2015; Fowler, 2000). According to these writers, a policy that does not consider issues of viability and feasibility from the beginning is an aborted policy. To that effect, a policy should align with effective implementation. Therefore, ILP need be preceded by language planning, which involves at least three tasks to be carried out (Heugh et al, 2007; Kamwangamalu, 2016): (1) status planning – a wise and participative decision about which languages are to be used for instructional purpose and at which levels; (2) corpus planning – preparing the language for instructional activity, i.e. the development of orthography, dictionaries, terminology development, standardization of the spoken forms in written form and others that pave the way for writing through the language as easily as possible; and (3) acquisition planning – the translation of materials into a written form for the ease of learning programs.

A successful implementation, in addition, requires involving the civil society throughout the process, creating awareness for and ownership of the society, setting a realistic timeframe (with short, medium and long term objectives tailored), allocating budget required, conducting a right and timely monitoring and evaluation, and preparing feedback delivery scheme. However, a closer examination of the ILP of the study area, informs that most of these procedures were overlooked because the priority of the government was inclined towards addressing political targets (Ayalew as cited in Daniel & Ababayehu, 2006; Seyum, 1996; Tekeste, 1996).

The government announces that IMT is one of the tools it implemented to address the accompanying values of democracy (equality, liberty, justice, respect of human rights, etc.) among the different nationalities of the country (TGE, 1994). Although the policy document claims that the intention of the language policy is to address the pedagogical advantages of the child, according to Seyoum (1996), the covered up assumption that influenced the policy makers in their endeavors throughout its various stages seems the ethnic-based political orientation. Seyoum claims that under the disguise of pedagogical benefits, the main goal of the ILP inclines

towards addressing the ethnic-based politics in the country. Otherwise, according to him, it would have not been necessary to abruptly implement the language policy prior to its formal declaration and swing back and forth in the meantime. Seyoum also condemns that the rush for a full scale implementation without pilot testing, too, has barred the materialization of the ILP objectives.

Concerning haste in implementation, Fowler (2000) underlines that the crucial step that determines the success or failure of policy implementation is the mobilization step where a serious error always leads to a disastrous failure. She recommends that some leaders want to implement a policy only to build their personal reputation for their future career advance. According to the findings of Berman and McLaughlin as well as Fullan (both cited in Fowler, 2000, pp. 278-279) policy implementations under such situations are “usually poorly planned and consist of more image than substance,” which rightly substantiates Seyoum’s (1996) concern. Fowler (2000) adds that others adopt and implement a new policy to enhance their reputation among the public as a progressive one more than recognizing the real problems entangled against and the challenges to solve it.

If the distance covered in the practice of ILP by the State of Amhara so far is examined, Fowler’s statement still seems to have been vividly governing. According to Seyoum, (1996), for instance, except the political expediency it addressed, the practice of IMT was pedagogically not more than a token. The measures taken by the government of the State of Amhara to reverse its decision on MoI (after a loss of scarce resources estimated in hundreds of millions) substantiates Seyoum’s critique once again because the decision was carried out merely to maintain the political power. Otherwise, a government should stick to its policy or resign if faced unpopularity and resistance by the public instead of changing its policy merely due to public dictation.

In addition to Seyoum, Daniel and Abebayeu (2006) criticized the imbalance of power relationship among the major actors in the policy formulation process. They contend in such a way that the government has put not only all the necessary resources like the media and the finance under its supreme control but also the power to deprive such resources from the contending parties. According to these authors, the government also labeled those actors such as multi-ethnic parties, private journalists and independent teachers’ union that opposed the policy *chauvinists* that got up against the benefits of nationalities. Under this camouflage the government deprived the major actors of their sources of power and further discouraged them by implementing different penalties (Daniel & Abebayeu, 2006). It was in the midst of all these shortcomings, which always doom a policy to failure, that the 1994 education and training policy and its ILP got into operation.

The introduction of IMT without taking the policy article states that “making the necessary preparation, nations and nationalities can either learn in their own language or can choose from among those selected on the basis of national and countrywide distribution” (TGE, 1994, p. 23). Lack of taking this into consideration further authenticates the above arguments. To begin with, implementation was so hurried and hence denied adequate time and opportunity to

plan as well as prepare and mobilize the required human and material resources. Second, its feature of implementation which obliges a child to learn in a specific ethnic language not because that language is her/his MT but because s/he is simply the member of that ethnic group practically disregards the will and right of such citizens. Third, mixed communities were in most cases generalized into a specific ethnic group violating UNESCO's (2003) declaration of providing special attention to those who cannot speak the MoI implemented in a specific area. Fourth, it was implemented for the sake of implementation because operations had started before equipping the implementers at grassroots levels with the required awareness and capacity. When the implementation was challenged from different directions, eventually, decision makers preferred English to MT as a MoI instead of putting the policy statement in place.

With respect to a good education policy, Fowler (2000) underlines that government commitment to address major social problems is one of the key factors that determine effectiveness in education policy. To this effect, she asserts, introducing a new education policy needs to involve the right actors and follow the right procedures of the policy process, right from issue definition all the way through the evaluation and improvement phases. Similarly, Mingat and Tan (2003) underline that mobilizing the support and cooperation of necessary actors and managing their diverse interests towards a common goal are the key requirement for decision makers. They believe that identifying the best policy choice that serves the whole country better highly demands the involvement of as much actors as possible in the entire policy process.

Other scholars (e.g. Ayalew as cited in Daniel & Ababayehu, 2006; Seyoum, 1996; Tekeste, 1996) who dealt with a related problem also suggest that lack of consulting and involving the public during the policy formulation might have generated the abovementioned problem of unpopularity on the ILP. In this case, Ayalew (1999) and Seyoum (1996) criticize that the formulation and implementation of the 1994 ILP, like its predecessors, failed to pursue the right procedures of policy process. Primarily, both argue that it was done through a top-down approach whereby a policy guideline for the immediate implementation of five major ethnic languages was issued by the "Conference of Peace and Democracy" held in Addis Ababa in 1991 without the involvement of necessary stakeholders. The conference, they stressed, went to the extent of deciding the type of script to be implemented without any research justification for its virtue. Had there been any participation from the necessary actors, Seyoum (1996) characterized, there would have been a wise and responsible argument instead of being more of a token.

Ayalew (as cited in Daniel & Ababayehu, 2006) and Tekeste (1996) both strongly criticize the decision of that conference for three major reasons. One, it was reached by the conference of political parties which claimed to represent the different ethnic groups of the country without having any proof for consulting the needs of the respective speakers of the language. Two, since it was decided without the consultation of professionals who had the knowledge on the how of it, the pros and cons of script selection and timing were not well justified. According to them, it was not certain whether the languages selected can easily, at less cost, and effectively be used for instruction. Three, it has been drawn through a mere political

motivation influenced by people with a meager prejudice against the Ethiopic alphabet because the Conference concluded the Ethiopic script as the language of long ages ruled by the Amhara Ethnic group. Therefore, although the issue of MoI was a question of the time, it is hardly possible to accept that the policy has properly addressed the underlying educational problem with the right remedy. The manifestation for this is the resistance that many ethnic groups have shown against the introduction of their languages as MoIs.

Overall, according to Daniel and Abebayehu (2006), Ayalew (1999), and Seyoum (1996), the ILP under examination was not set as a policy agenda because it was drawn by top-level officials. If it was so, they argue, it should have taken much time and involved as much partners as possible in its development process. According to them, no input was also incorporated on the document even though MoE had held a discussion on the draft document long after several languages were put into operation. That is, the development of the ILP did not follow the logical procedure of policy development activities should pass through. Arguably, therefore, the ILP of Ethiopia has been adopted without the proper and right involvement of concerned actors that could have rendered valuable contributions at the formulation stage to legitimize its popularity and recognition. We can, therefore, learn that whatever smart a policy idea is its materialization depends not only on the availability of resources required but also on its popularity, which highly demands back-to-back application of the right procedure of policy formulation.

According to Ayalew (1999), Seyoum (1996) and Teshome (1999) the implementation stage of the policy was the most amazing phenomenon in the process of ILP. That is because, they argue, its implementation was carried out in a way of putting the cart before the horse; the implementation preceded its formal declaration or official adoption. They criticized that the implementation was characterized by haste and unforeseen mandatory circumstances that denied time for sound planning and preparation of the required preconditions as well as lack of material and human resources, not to mention the subsequent challenges faced to achieve public awareness and conviction. Thus, failure of proper implementation has resulted in various complicated problems that triggered public anxiety, discontent and resistance that ultimately forced the government of Amhara to abandon the policy direction and switch off IMT in grades seven and eight and replace it with English.

Berhanu (2009) and Heugh et al. (2007) showed that problems were also observed in the evaluation stage of the ILP. To begin with, according to them, reversing the MoI to English in the upper primary by the State of Amhara, for instance, indicated that there were problems at the evaluation stage because it lacked a presentation of the right remedial mechanism. They found out that the measure taken was simply dictated by public discontent and echo rather than matured and knowledge (research) based decisions. Daniel and Abebayehu (2006), alike, contend that in contrast to the policy intention, students of language minority areas for whom the policy advocated success are found to display low educational achievement for which the evaluation activity has hardly identified a right justification. This situation is not yet remedied perhaps because the criteria and methodology of evaluation implemented may have missed its target and hence lacked both validity and reliability. This is in turn because in many places the measures

taken to resolve the problems have been diverting the MoI into English more than improving the practices of IMT.

Table 1

LoI in primary schools and in colleges of teacher education in the State of Amhara*

Primary Schools		Colleges of Teacher Education	
First Cycle	Second Cycle	First Cycle Teachers	Second Cycle Teachers
Grades 1 – 4	Grades 5 – 6		
Mother Tongues	Mother Tongues	Mother Tongues	Mother Tongues
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English for sciences and math MTs (Amharic, Awugni, and Himtagna) for other subjects Afan Oromo in both cycles of primary schools in the entire Oromia Administrative Zone 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MTs for the prospective teachers of social sciences and aesthetics in grades 7 and 8 English for prospective teachers of mathematics and natural sciences in grades 7 and 8

CONCLUSION

According to the discussions made so far, it is convincing that IMT does not impede the acquisition of English proficiency among pupils and at the same time employing English as a MoI does not necessarily improve their English proficiency. Hence, although the ILP was relevant and useful in many aspects, efforts made to employ MTs for instructional purposes did not produce the expected outcomes. Many problems from the outset have resulted in the unpopularity of the ILP and IMT: no needs assessment carried out; there has been inadequate supply of necessary human and material resources or lack of preparation before implementation, lack of taking contexts into considered, lack of effective involvement of necessary stakeholders at all levels of the policy process, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation activities and poor feedback delivery. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the practice of the ILP has in most of its dimensions been a matter of political expediency rather than a well thought out and planned reform that can satisfy the wants of customers. Consequently, the process reminds us the classical Amharic adage of *sirotu yetatequt sirotu yifetal*, i.e. what is belted up running releases while running (roughly translated).

* So far, four mother tongues other than Amharic – Argoba, Awgni, Himtagna, and Oromifa – are employed as MoIs in the primary schools of the State of Amhara.

IMPLICATIONS

Needless to mention, our contemporary world is characterized more by knowledge economy and globalization. Knowledge economy refers to the production and service delivery based on knowledge-intensive activities that accelerate the pace of technical and scientific advance and the consequent rapid obsolescence. Its key component is greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources. Globalization, on the other side, refers to the emergence of an international network in every aspect of human life that is demonstrated by the shrinking of the world, the shortening of distances, and the closeness of things so that the interaction of any person on one part of the world to someone found on the other part of the world is much faster and easier than ever before. Survival in such an environment requires competence in productivity, competitiveness and effective management, all of which are functions of the generation of knowledge, skills and information processing. In such an environment, obviously, both knowledge and communication are very essential. From this point of view, both delivering education in a MT and at the same time improving proficiency in a worldwide language have their own mutually inclusive roles in keeping citizens competitive enough in the abovementioned socio-economic environment. Under this situation IMT provides an indispensable pedagogical benefit for equipping citizens with the necessary knowledge and skill to ultimately help them in coping with the competition of the knowledge economy. The acquisition of necessary skills in a globally spoken language, English, has a similar role because it helps to effectively communicate citizens and secure the economic benefit, which otherwise is to be lost, in such a highly networked and shrank world market environment. Hence, it calls for many efforts as possible to be made to benefit from both IMT and improving English proficiency to maintain survival in the steadily globalizing world socio-economic environment of the day.

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