



Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction: Benefits and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to assess the psychological benefits and challenges of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. The participants of the study were students in School of Education and Behavioral Sciences, WSU. The tools used were self-report questionnaire and focus group discussions. The data was analyzed employing both descriptive and advanced inferential statistics. Majority of students have positive attitude and addressed psychological benefits of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. They reported that learning in mother tongue boosts their self-confidence, psychological stamina, self-expressive skills, clarity of classroom communication and instruction (concepts, abstracts, meanings, and other instructional elements are easily understood), academic achievement and overall quality education. Their worries were limited access to job opportunities in specific zones and limited scope in national and international arena for further career advancement. Some students reported that use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at earlier grades contributed to low competencies in other languages and greatly contributed to writing, spelling, reading, and pronunciation errors in English and other languages usage. Among the predictor variables included in the study, mothers' level of education, fathers' and mothers' occupation were found to be important predictors of students' attitude towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

Keywords: psychological benefits, attitude, mother tongue, mother tongue instruction

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful means of communication which has enabled us to be more developed in comparison to other creatures so far found in the world. It is the principal means used by human beings to communicate with one another. It is that divine gift for human being, 'species specific to man' that has enabled us to enjoy the pleasure available in the world. Our identity lies in the culture we follow. One of the most powerful forms of symbolization and central feature of all human culture is language. Moreover, it is a part of culture which is a system of symbolic verbal and sometimes written representation learned within a particular culture (Appelbaum & Chambliss, 1995).

Language is a sign system fulfilling the cognitive and communicative functions in the process of human activity. The term cognitive as the process of acquiring knowledge by the use of reasoning, intuition or perception. One of the critical concerns of schooling is whether linguistic development determines the cognitive development of a child. There is a debate among applied linguist and educational psychologist on the issue, nonetheless, we can claim that if the former has a beneficial role for the development of latter than mother tongue instruction becomes a crucial topic for discussion. One of the psycholinguist, Bruner suggests that the school is a very important determiner of the use of language to facilitate cognitive growth (Brown, 2000).

Mother tongue instruction may have two connotations: teaching mother tongue itself and imparting formal education in the first language of students. But while we talk about the mother tongue instruction we take the second meaning of the term. There is debate whether students to be taught in their mother tongue or in the language that has international recognition. Both of the arguments may have their own rationale and theoretical back up. If we analyze them from different perspectives we may draw various

conclusions. However, more people are motivated towards mother tongue instruction in the world today. One of the world organizations advocating mother tongue instruction is United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural (UNESCO). But the attempts have not got whole-hearted success. Although UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue instruction in early childhood and primary education since 1953, mono-lingualism in the official or dominant language is still the norm around the world (Arnold *et al* as cited in UNESCO, 2007).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, according to Ouane (2003) there are between 1, 250 and 2,100 languages. However, school children in this region very rarely have chances to receive their education in the mother tongue. Many African countries still use colonial languages as a medium of instruction at different learning levels. Kuper (2003) reports that in 22 out of 39 African countries primary education still uses one of the colonial languages. Only three countries-Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Tanzania-employ the mother tongue for the whole duration of primary education.

Learning with mother tongues other than Amharic is relatively a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. It dates back to the early 1990s when the Traditional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) issued an interim education and language policy. The TGE administered the country on the basis of a transitional charter which recognized the rights of peoples, nations, and nationalities to self-determination, their rights to develop and defend their culture and history as well as nurture their languages. In 1992, the TGE introduced new measures concerning primary education in ethio-national languages. Among the languages the policy stipulated that the Afaan Oromo, Wolaita, Sidama and Tigrinya languages would be used as media of instruction from 1991-1992 school year. In addition, Arabic was recommended for use in the region of Benishangul Gumuz (Teshome, n.d).

In 1994, the TGE issued the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (ETP). This was based on the principle that all nations and nationalities have the right to be educated in their own language and to preserve their culture. The policy also recognizes the pedagogical advantages for the child if education is given in the mother tongue. The ETP again confirmed that several languages with largest number of speakers would be used directly as media of instruction in primary education whilst minority languages would be gradually introduced in to the school system. Until such a stage is reached, minority groups are using the language of their choices from among those selected on the basis of national and countryside distribution (Teshome, n.d).

Education systems inattentive to mother tongue languages different from the second language (L2) used for instruction have not provided opportunities for acquisition of the L2 before literacy development, nor have given necessary support in learning literacy basic skills in the child's mother tongue. Interdisciplinary studies concerning language planning and policy in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that these systems have been failing to educate children effectively, denied them access to a quality education and to working life and ultimately wasted precious time as well as countless energy. Children from ethno-linguistic communities with access to education neither speak nor understand the official language used for instruction by the time they begin primary school. Being communicatively competent only in their mother tongue-not used in the classroom as a foundation for developing literacy skills-the official language represents a L2 to be learned while acquiring the literacy foundation (Bokamba, 1991; Kamwangamalu, 2008).

The success of a mother tongue instruction highly depends on people's attitudes towards it. Attitudes can be created through functions that people perceive particular languages as performing. In the African context, Robinson (1996) is of the opinion that official and local languages are regarded as opposed to each other rather than as complementary as evidenced by the fact that one of the two languages may be regarded as a more suitable language for certain domains and the characteristic functions are seen in dichotomous terms. Robinson says the local languages are characterized by oral usage, individual/community usage, emotional attachment, village solidarity, and personal loyalties. The official language is characterized by institutional usage, written usage, functional use, economic advantage, and national communication. In addition, English in some African counties as an official language has,

therefore, been associated with success, power, prestige, progress, and achievement and such associations have generally resulted in English getting a high positive evaluation (Adegbija, 1994).

Education and language are well connected and are inseparable components of each other. The former is not possible without the latter. Thus a careful decision regarding the medium of instruction in education with reference to the learners' development and learning competence is more crucial when it is being decided in country, which is totally diverse in nature. The medium of instruction makes the learning pattern simple or complex. Scholars in the area believe that the education given in second language is always hindering the learners' innate potentials (Kamwangamalu, 2008).

The current language education policy of Ethiopian, which has been in place since 1994, accords high practical status to the mother tongue as medium of instruction, particularly at the primary level; transition to English at grades above 4 depending upon the region and the learning of Amharic as a subject by speakers of languages. The findings of contemporary research support extended educational use of the mother tongue and the addition of other languages through bi-or trilingual policies. This means that Ethiopian language education policy falls broadly within the parameters of 'best policy' in terms of multilingual developing countries. However, as is the case in many other countries, implementation is not always aligned with actual policy (Alemayehu, 2015).

There are always special circumstances, attitudes, and other impediments which need to be identified and dealt with in order for policy to work efficiently and get the best return on investment. One of these is clearly the issue of how English can be used effectively alongside Ethiopian languages to support good teaching and learning of the curriculum. A main concern of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Ethiopia at present is the practical implementation of a workable language policy which will support the equitable delivery of quality education to which all have access. The goal of quality education is to facilitate optimal cognitive development of the pupil through schooling (UNESCO, 2007). Research demonstrates that there is a continuum of interrelated connections between language and cognition, moving from the development of social language proficiency to academic language proficiency and then to academic achievement (Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1987).

The importance of mother tongue as a subject and medium of instruction in lower primary schools is often down played when important decisions regarding languages of education are taken. Questions have been raised on the pedagogical appropriateness of mother tongue. Some have even doubted if teaching and learning in mother tongue would not damage the course of national unity and whether or not starting one's education in mother tongue would not jeopardize later learning in English (Otto, 1997). Depending on the information outlined above, the following research questions were forwarded:

- What are the attitudes of students towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction?
- Is there sex difference in attitude among students towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction?
- What are the psychological and pedagogical benefits of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction?
- What are the factors which predict the attitude of students towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction?

METHOD

Study design

The study was a descriptive survey that used focus group discussions and self-report questionnaire to collect qualitative and quantitative data.

Study site description, study population, and sample selection

Wolaita Sodo University is one of the second generation Universities in Ethiopia. The university is located at Wolaita Sodo Town (Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region), which is 289 kms away from the center, Addis Ababa. The University has six colleges and three schools. School of Education and Behavioral Sciences is one of the schools. The study population were second and third

year students in the Department of Psychology and Educational Planning and Management (EdPM). The students in the Department of EdPM were 78 (Male= 43 and Female=35), while students in the Department of Psychology were 98 (Male=61 and Female=37), totaling 186 (Male=104 and Female=72).

Instruments

Focus group discussions and self-report questionnaires were used to collect data from students. The questionnaire on *students’ attitude towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction* was measured on four point Likert Scale. The items in the questionnaire were adapted, originally developed by Nigerian scholars, Matta &Teneke (2010). The items for focus group discussions were developed by the researcher. Reliability was ensured because the questionnaire was structured to allow for greater uniformity in the way questions were responded ($r=.78$). The focus group discussions were conducted in English since most of the respondents were not competent in Amharic (Federal government working language). The validity aspects were assured for focus group discussion items.

Procedures of data collection

Permission to conduct the data was sought from the dean of the school and respective department heads. The focus group discussions were conducted by the researcher and done in three sessions (five students per session). Students for focus group discussions were identified by class instructors who were above average learners who could communicate better in English (students were composed of different ethnic backgrounds). Questionnaires were administered to all students of second and third year in the selected departments. Before administering tools for data collection, consents of students were secured and convenience time for students were also considered.

Data analysis techniques

Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques were employed. Descriptive statistics were used to depict the background characteristics of students. Independent samples t-test was employed to examine differences among male and female students on attitudes towards mother tongue as medium of instruction and multiple regression analysis was also employed to assess the degree of prediction power of each independent variable on the criterion variable (i.e., attitude). All assumptions related to independent samples t-test and multiple regression were met. The analysis was done using SPSS (Version 20.0).

RESULTS

This part of the research addressed the results of the study, where the data was collected through self-report questionnaire and focus group discussions; and the analysis was made using both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Sex and Ethnicity of Respondents (N=176)

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Sex	<i>Male</i>	104	59.10
	<i>Female</i>	72	40.90
Ethnicity	<i>Oromo</i>	22	12.50
	<i>Amhara</i>	16	9.10
	<i>Gurage</i>	8	4.50
	<i>Wolaita</i>	68	38.6
	<i>Gamo</i>	34	19.3
	<i>Hadiya</i>	8	4.5
	<i>Kambata</i>	8	4.5
	<i>Sidama</i>	4	2.3
	<i>Gofa</i>	8	4.5

There were 104 (59.1 percent) male student respondents and the rest 72 (40.9 percent) were female students. Among the respondents, students from Wolaita ethnic group were greater in number (68, 38.6 percent) followed by students from Gamo (34, 19.3 percent) and Oromo ethnic groups (22, 12.5 percent).

Table 2. Parental Education and Occupation Status of Respondents (N=176)

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Fathers' education	<i>Degree and above holders</i>	64	36.4
	<i>Diploma holders</i>	22	12.5
	<i>Secondary level education completed</i>	28	15.9
	<i>Primary level education completed</i>	40	22.7
	<i>Did not attend formal education</i>	22	12.5
Mothers' education	<i>Degree and above holders</i>	30	17
	<i>Diploma holders</i>	10	5.7
	<i>Certificate holders</i>	12	6.8
	<i>Secondary level completed</i>	6	3.4
	<i>Primary level completed</i>	74	42.0
	<i>Did not attend formal education</i>	44	25.0
Fathers' occupation	<i>Government employees</i>	96	54.5
	<i>Self-employees</i>	24	13.6
	<i>Farmers</i>	56	31.8
Mothers' occupation	<i>Government employees</i>	40	22.7
	<i>Self-employees</i>	26	14.8
	<i>House wives</i>	110	62.5

Concerning respondents' fathers' education status, more than 36 percent were degree and above holders, followed by primary level education completed (22.7 percent) and secondary level education complete (nearly 16 percent). On the other hand, majority of respondents' mothers' were primary level education completed (42 percent) followed by those who did not attend formal education (25 percent). More than half of the respondents' fathers were government employees (nearly 55 percent), followed by farmers (nearly 32 percent). When the mothers' occupation is concerned, more than 60 percent of them were house wives followed by government employees.

Independent samples t-test and multiple regression computations

Table 3. T-test Computation on Students Attitude towards Mother Tongue Instruction (N=176)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Attitude	Equal variances assumed	5.399	.023	.728	86	.469	1.173	1.612	-2.031	4.377
	Equal variances not assumed			.684	58.604	.496	1.173	1.714	-2.257	4.603

The independent samples t-test comparison of male and female students concerning attitudes on mother tongue as a medium of instruction did not show statistically significant difference ($t=.728, p>.05$).

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis of Predictor Variables on Criterion Variable (N=176)

<i>Model</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig</i>
<i>Constant</i>	56.525	2.801		20.183	.000**
<i>Sex</i>	-.768	1.359	-.051	-.565	.574
<i>Ethnicity</i>	.817	.300	.288	2.72	.008*
<i>Father education</i>	-.956	.533	-.251	-1.793	.077
<i>Mother education</i>	5.068	1.131	1.229	4.479	.000**
<i>Father occupation</i>	-3.187	.749	-.596	-4.256	.000**
<i>Mother occupation</i>	-4.268	1.065	-.965	-4.008	.000**
<i>R</i> ² = .366, <i>adj R</i> ² = .320					
<i>F</i> = 7.808					
					.000**

Dependent Variable: attitude

*Predictors: (Constant), sex, ethnicity, father education, mother education, father occupation, mother occupation *p<.05, **p<.01*

The ANOVA output indicated above showed overall significance of the model $F(6, 169) = 7.808$, $p < 0.05$). According to the model summary table, about 37 percent ($R^2 = 0.366$) of the variance accounted for attitude towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction is due to six predictor variables included in the study. The Standardized Beta Coefficients give a measure of the contribution of each variable to the model. A large value indicates that a unit change in this predictor variable has a large effect on the criterion variable. The t and Sig (p) values give a rough indication of the impact of each predictor variable—a big absolute t value and small p value suggests that a predictor variable is having a large impact on the criterion variable.

Hence, among the predictor variables included in the study, the impact of mother education on criterion variable is greater ($\beta = 1.229$, $p < 0.001$) followed by mothers' ($\beta = -.965$, $p < 0.001$) and fathers' occupation ($\beta = -.596$, $p < 0.001$). When mothers' formal education level rises and employed at government and non-government organizations, their children's attitude towards mother tongue education at upper level tend to decrease. The same is true for fathers' occupation. The independent contribution of sex and fathers' education were not found to be statistically significant.

Analysis of Focus group Discussions Data

Twenty (twelve male and eight female) students (eleven from psychology department and nine from educational planning and management department) were part of focus group discussions to secure feelings and opinions on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the Ethiopian context. Eighteen students boldly explained that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction has variety of advantages. For instance, the clarity of instruction, mutual understanding between teachers and students, development of students' self-confidence, lessor test anxiety, development of problem solving skills, development of creativity, boosts development of self-identity, increases classroom participation, and makes learning enjoyable. Learning in mother tongue provides a greater opportunity to find cultural elites, intellectual resources, and others relevant from society for help in academia, cultural, social, and personal needs. Furthermore, students responded that learning in mother tongue makes to master basic arithmetic and literacy skills early. In general, they reported that in using mother tongue as a medium of instruction, environment of learning becomes resourceful.

Two students were not comfortable with mother tongue as a medium of instruction at secondary schools. Early mastery of mother tongue alphabets interferes with the learning of the second and third languages in later grades, where some letters having different usage and pronunciation. That is, some letters have different meanings in English and in mother tongues (*in Omotic and Cushetic family of languages*). These students forwarded that the use of mother tongue instruction created an impact in writing other languages

(some students' English writings and pronunciations resemble their mother tongue for instance, students from *Omotic* language family, pronounce "F" as "P" or vice-versa, this is easily identified in their communications) and reading skills among students even in the Universities.

Students from *Cushetic* language family face serious problems in writing and spelling skills (for instance, when asked to write the name Gezahegn (Amharic name) in English, they write it as *Gezaheny* or *Gezahenge*). According to the two students, this had created an opportunity to easily identify ethnic background of students and taken as a basis for peer selection and also isolate themselves from other ethnic origin students.

For the last question raised in the focus group discussion sessions "*If you have given a chance to place yourself in your mother tongue department in the Universities, how do you decide on it?*" Ten students responded that they will not place themselves. The reasons mentioned were limited access to job opportunities, community acceptance, career advancement, scholarships, and international exposures. In general, majority of students did not have any problems with mother tongue as a medium of instruction but they do have worries on job and other opportunities after specializing in mother tongue. They added that most teachers who assigned to teach the mother tongue at primary and secondary levels were not specialized in mother tongue and even some of them have negative attitudes towards teaching it. Students reported gaps in the professional competence and interest among teachers in teaching mother tongue.

In summary, students prefer their mother tongue to other languages for any communication and feel proud for chances to develop their linguistic and cultural identity. They also reported that they write better in their mother tongues than in English or other languages. Their further worry was that the community and parents give high prestige and worth for learning in English.

DISCUSSIONS

The present study tried to address the attitude of students towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction. To assess the issue, descriptive survey design was employed and data was collected through self-report questionnaire and focus group discussions. The analysis was made employing both descriptive and inferential statistics. The present study showed that there was no statistically significant difference among male and female students on attitude towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Majority of respondents have positive attitude towards it. The reasons mentioned by them were clarity of instruction, mutual understanding between teachers and students, development of students' self-confidence, lessor test anxiety, development of problem solving skills, development of creativity, development of self-identity, increases classroom participation, and makes learning enjoyable. In addition, they mentioned that learning environment becomes resourceful when instruction is provided in mother tongue.

There were six predictor variables included in the study. The attitude of students towards mother tongue education among students was highly predicted by mother level of education, father and mother occupation respectively. Consistently mentioned problems by discussants in focus groups were limited access to job opportunity, career advancement, scholarships, and international exposures. Majority of students were not wholeheartedly welcoming if they were requested to place themselves in their respective mother tongues departments in the government universities. The success of mother tongue instruction policy depends on people's attitudes. To understand how attitudes towards a language develop, it is necessary to consider the social and political history of a nation, since such historical forces play a significant role (Robinson, 1996; Bamgbose, 1991).

Attitudes can be created through functions that people perceive particular languages as performing. Robinson (1996), in the most of African context, there is an opinion that official and local languages are regarded as opposed to each other, rather than as complementary as evidenced by the fact that one of the two languages may be regarded as a more suitable language for certain domains and the characteristic functions are seen in dichotomous terms. He stated that in most African countries, the local languages are characterized by oral usage, individual/community usage, emotional attachment, village solidarity and personal loyalties. On the other hand, the official language is characterized by institutional usage, written

usage, functional usage, economic advantage, and national communication. English as an official language has therefore been associated with success, power, prestige, progress, achievement, and such associations have generally resulted in English getting a high positive evaluation.

In contrary to the current finding, in Tanzania where education in primary schools is conducted in *Kiswahili*, studies by Roy-Campbell (1996) showed that students favor the retention of English as a medium of instruction at secondary level. Furthermore, he found that many Tanzanian students who said that English should be maintained as the medium of instruction could barely carry out a conversation in English with the researcher. Such sentiments expressed by students who could hardly communicate in English can only be attributed to attitudes. Roy-Campbell goes on to say that students do not value their mother tongue, hence they would prefer to learn using a language that they do not understand even when given the option to use their own language in learning.

In agreement with the current finding, educators encourage the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction for pedagogical and psychological advantages. Accordingly, children are advised to start their primary education through a language that they first and usually speak best (Rubin & Bamgbose, 1976; Jernuadd, 1971). They argued that effective language use determines the quality of education because successful communication between students and teacher avoids confusion and misunderstanding of concepts and meanings.

A recent review of research reports on language and literacy concludes that becoming literate and fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development as well as academic achievement (Ball, 2010; Adegbija, 1994). Evidences from Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam, and elsewhere attests to the benefits of learning in a familiar language. First, children learn to read faster if they speak the language of instruction, because they already have a repository of vocabulary, knowledge of the linguistic construction of the language and the ability to pronounce the sounds of the language. This prior knowledge facilitates learning to read as well as comprehending text.

Being able to read and understand the language in turn facilitates academic learning. For example, a recent evaluation of a mother tongue education program in Cameroon reveals that children who were taught in their mother tongue, *Kom*, performed significantly better in multiple subjects (including Math and English) than a control group of peers who attended schools where English was the medium of instruction (Chuo & Walter, 2011). In Vietnam, 68% of grade one students in a mother tongue program achieved the level of excellent compared to only 28% of students not learning in their mother tongue (UNICEF, 2011).

The current research output showed the cultural, societal, pedagogical, and psychological benefits of mother tongue instruction. By learning in the mother tongue, children's home culture and traditional knowledge are validated and reinforced. Children gain a better self-concept and have a strong sense of their own identity. Such children usually achieve better in school and life than children who are forced to learn in an unknown, strange language (Ball, 2010). Use of a familiar language for instruction validates local culture and knowledge, creating a bridge between the formal school system and children's home and community environment. This, in turn, facilitates parental involvement and strengthens community support for education, since language is not a barrier to participating in children's schooling.

Mastering a first language and core learning concepts promotes general cognitive development that is needed to more easily and rapidly learn a second language. Because language and reading are closely related, learning to read in one's first language facilitates reading in a second, since many key skills related to reading are transferrable from one language to another. However, children will need explicit instruction and support in transferring skills and knowledge from their L1 to L2 as well as consistent and robust language instruction in the L2 (Malone, 2009).

To the contrary, most respondents in Tanzanian research felt that English offers them better opportunities for employment compared to *Shona*. English was seen as empowering them to compete well in the global village. English seems to guarantee them access to the system and equal opportunity to participate in it. Changing to indigenous languages is viewed as a direct threat to their (respondents) perceived job

opportunities, thus attracting negative attitudes (Roy-Campbell, 1996). The issue of job opportunities and other benefits were also the concern of the present study result.

In the north-western area of Cameroon *Kom* is the primary language spoken but English is the language of instruction in local schools. The fact that the L2 is the foreign medium of instruction poses common problems of comprehension and expression. Oral and written communicative exchange is reduced to “safe talk”-a term referring to classroom interaction practices such as rote learning or repetition-at the detriment of active, deeper learning that cannot take place in the classroom. Negative consequences of it influence not only pupils lacking the language competence to understand what the teacher says but also teachers who often face language difficulties themselves, as only have passable proficiency in the designated language of instruction (Chick, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the present study, the following conclusions were made:

- Sex of the respondents did not reveal statistically significant difference towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction
- Majority of students have positive attitude towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction at primary and secondary levels of education.
- Due to limited access to job opportunities and other benefits, majority of students uncover their needs not to place themselves in mother tongue departments if opportunities given despite positive attitude towards it.
- Mothers’ education, fathers’ and mothers’ occupation highly predict students’ attitude towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction respectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The current research did not address issues on attitudes towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction among parents and communities. Hence, the future research on parental and community attitudes is desirable.

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