

# The Role of Mother Tongue Based Education in Ensuring the Quality of Classroom Instruction: Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

While there are many factors involved in delivering quality basic education, language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom. Many developing countries, including Ethiopia, are characterized societal multilingualism; yet continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. However, the issues of mother tongues should be underlined as we look for quality of education in the grass root level. Therefore, this paper highlights important issues in mother tongue education such as arguments in the using of mother tongue for classroom instruction, role of mother tongue for second language learning in Ethiopian context, various countries experiences in the benefits of mother tongue based education and the role of mother tongue education in maintaining quality of education. Eventually, it forwards recommendations which should be considered in further actions.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of Ethiopia, mother tongue (MT) is being used as a classroom instruction tool in different parts of the country since the last two decades. The question is not *whether* there is a role for the mother tongue in the classroom. Of course, there is a role for the mother tongue (MT) in the classroom. The *real question* is what is the role of the mother tongue and to what extent it contributes to the quality of education. It is not an easy question, but whether teachers like it or not – the MT will always be there, and the sooner its role is more effectively exploited, the better.

Discussions of the role of the MT are often controversial and polarized, full of misunderstandings and an unhealthy amount of guilt. This review paper will attempt to clarify the nature of its role, by discussing both sides of the issue and by looking at through the concept of quality education. From a practical perspective, it will encourage teachers to think about their current viewpoint regarding MT and its school roles and for those interested, it will offer places to find effective ways to use the MT in the classroom.

### What is MTB Education?

MTB education is instruction in a child's first language (L1), usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school. MTB instruction usually takes place exclusively in the language most familiar to children. In some cases, it may be provided as part of a bilingual or multilingual education program. In MTB programs, students have the opportunity to learn core concepts primarily in a familiar language, and, later, they learn the labels or vocabulary for those concepts in a new language. MTB education is especially beneficial in early childhood programs, preschool, and the early grades (up to grade 6), when children are learning to read and gaining new concepts (Benson, 2006).

### Federalism and Language Use in Primary Education in Ethiopia since 1991

The use of several Ethiopian Languages in primary education is a reflection of reforms in the geopolitical structures of the State after 1991 that divided Ethiopia into regional states. The borders of the regions were based upon the use of languages and the previous body of linguistic literature that attempted a categorisation of Ethiopian people according to language and geographical area. The rights of nationalities

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within the State to use languages for official purposes are enshrined in article 39 of the 1994 Constitution of Ethiopia. The use of Regional languages is a strong feature of federalism and an aspect of the representation of Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic groups of people.

The Education and Training Policy (1994) promotes the use of regional and local languages for two stated reasons. The first reason is the claim that learning in the mother tongue has clear pedagogical advantages for the child, who feels comfortable and reassured by their ability to understand and analyse information in their own language. The second reason is the claim that the use of local languages in education accords with the rights of nationalities to self-expression that are enshrined in the Constitution of Ethiopia. The Ministry of Education, therefore, presents both pedagogical and ideological justifications for promoting the use of local languages for primary education.

## **2. The Two Side Arguments toward the Use of Mother Tongue**

### **Arguments in Favor of the Use of Mother Tongue Instruction**

The first important authority to mention in favor of mother tongue instruction is UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). UNESCO assembled a Committee to study about the language in instructional medium at global level. And the Committee came up with the position that "the language that children can effectively use, should be given priority in selecting the medium of instruction. If this is done, then, it becomes clear that the choice in every case will virtually be the child's mother tongue" (Fasold, 1984: 293).

California State Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Bicultural Education (CSDE) (1991) experts forwarded reasons why they need and make real effort to maintain first language. First, speakers of a language other than English can make priceless contribution for their countries so it is very important to maintain this natural resource. Similarly, sustaining the first language and culture of 'non-English proficient' (NEP) children may help to put up their self-importance and reciprocate unfavorable attitude of linguistic minority. According to Gardner and Lambert cited in CSDE (1991) those individuals who accept their own language and culture do well in second language learning than those who have unfavorable attitude towards their own group. Also, according to Cummins as referred in CSDE (1991) so as to sustain in subject matter and maintain normal mental development, students need to build up high stage of first language capability.

Thirdly, Chumbow (1990), like UNESCO, listed out the importance of mother tongue instruction in education by providing more scientific arguments. First, mother tongue has psychological value to the child. That is, it serves very important role in shaping the child's early perception because language and thought are highly interrelated. No one can think with out using language in its any form (articulated, symbolic, etc.). Second, mother tongue has socio-cultural significance since it would help the member of the target group to express its common cultural familiarity and tendency. Thirdly, the early school use of mother tongue in the child's life will give permanence for the child's course of learning and which in turn enhance its cognitive development. Early switch of language from mother tongue to second or foreign languages will create feeling of insufficiency, low self-esteem and develop dislike toward his teachers and school. And finally, 'mobilization of rural communities' for agriculture, adult education, vocational training etc could best be attained by the use of native languages. This kind of community mobilization can provide a lot of contribution for national development and to build modern society.

### **Arguments against the Use of Mother Tongue Instruction**

Fasold reviewed the objections forwarded about the recommendations of UNESCO 's Committee on the use of mother tongue instruction. The objections are some languages, it may seem, have no grammar or alphabet;it is useless to teach a mother tongue, since a child already knows it; to teach in mother tongue will make it more difficult for a youngster to learn a second language later; and using vernacular languages would impede national unity (Fasold, 1984:293-294).

Other more rationally conceived arguments include that learning in local languages limits students' social mobility and narrows the range of economic opportunities that are open to them. Some Ethiopian languages are highly developed vehicles for education that promote a full understanding of concepts, facilitate literacy and lead to wider opportunities in the State. Other languages that are inadequately developed for education inevitably relegate children who are educated in them to less-than-equal status within the State, making it impossible for them to compete on equal terms for opportunities with Ethiopians who are educated in well developed languages. The argument that the use of different languages is inherently unfair and unequal considering the different societal, historical positions and levels of development and standardization of languages is the most important for the present article as it criticises the use of different languages from a pedagogical perspective and attempts to highlight issues of equity.

### **Responses to the Arguments against the use of MT**

Fasold (1984) also compiled the responses to the Committee Report and for the above objections. First, he says "even though some languages may not have written grammar, any language must have grammar otherwise it should not have been spoken." Furthermore, for the second objection, the Committee provided two replies; first, "children know their mother tongue well enough to serve a child's purposes, but their facility in it needs to be increased; and second, the point is not so much that the school would be teaching the mother tongue as teaching other subjects in the mother tongue" (Fasold, 1984:294). Also, the response to the third objection is that current knowledge in several places proposes that a healthier way to launch a second language may be to teach it first as a subject, using the native language as an instructional media. Finally, however, the UNESCO Committee admits that it is easier to govern a country with the same language, persistence on the national language might motivate some minority groups to be offended by their national government and repudiate to accept the national identity.

On the first three objections, UNESCO Committee responded satisfactorily and the responses were accepted by most linguists as to Fasold. But on the last objection, the answer is more political than logical for linguists. In addition, there is another set of serious objections on which UNESCO Committee responded with less success. This set of objections is more concerned with readiness of the language to be used in education.

### **3. The Role of Mother Tongue for SL Learning in Ethiopian Context**

Learning in one language may facilitate the study of another language. Second languages are often learned through the vehicles of mother tongues, including in Europe where second languages are learned in formal education settings. In other circumstances, students learn second languages through total immersion when second languages are employed as the exclusive medium of instruction in formal primary education. This was previously the case in Ethiopia, where non-Amharic speaking students learned Amharic and learned in Amharic from their first day in school. This practice, however, led to high dropout rates during grade one in non-Amharic speaking areas, which were attributed by many teachers, including the present author, to be largely due to alienation experienced by students resulting primarily from the use of a language other than students' mother tongue (Cohen,2000).

In order to address this situation, Ethiopian regional and local languages were introduced for use in primary education. But, they were introduced in great haste before they were sufficiently standardized for the purpose of education. Preparations including adequate training of teachers to use local languages in the classroom and the development of textbooks were inadequate, and the purpose of the reform was not made explicit to local communities (Cohen, 2006). In practice, therefore, using local languages for primary education in Ethiopia is unlikely to produce equal quality of education for students since some languages are better developed as vehicles for education than others, if only because they are more standardized as a result of existing patterns of use.

Although it is clear that children should have their first learning experiences in their mother tongues in order to increase their confidence in educational situations, it should also be recognized that one of the

important roles for mother tongues in primary education is as vehicles for teaching languages of wider communication. In Ethiopia, moreover, local languages should not necessarily be the only languages used as media of instruction in primary education, while Amharic and English are taught only as single subjects. In order to teach some subjects in local languages, there has to be an artificial process of creating words that both teachers and students feel are contrived and do not make sense and therefore feel uncomfortable with their use.

This problem was marked when developing local Ethiopian languages for use in teaching science subjects. If languages of wider communication are only taught as subjects in primary education, rather than adopted for broad use as media of instruction for subjects, then it is unlikely that students will be able to use them confidently when they become the media of instruction in secondary and tertiary education. So it would be better to balance the use of local languages and languages of wider communication as media of instruction in primary education, dividing subjects between the languages in an appropriate manner.

#### **4. What are the Benefits of MTB Education?**

When curriculum content is presented in an unfamiliar language, an enormous amount of time must be spent first teaching children to understand, speak, read, and write L2 or a foreign language, something that is extremely difficult and wastes valuable years in the early grades that could be spent learning to read and learning academic concepts in L1. Moreover, children, who cannot understand the language used in the classroom, are unable to demonstrate what they know, ask questions, and participate.

In contrast, providing children with an opportunity to learn in a language they understand—starting on the first day of school—confers significant advantages for the education system, teachers, parents, and students. Key benefits of MTB education include the following:

##### **Improves Access to Education**

Children who understand the language of instruction are more likely to enter school at age-appropriate times and attend school regularly; moreover, they are less likely to drop out than those who receive instruction in a foreign language. An analysis of data from 22 developing countries and 160 language groups revealed that children who had access to instruction in their mother tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school, while a lack of education in a first language was a significant reason for children dropping out (Smits et al., 2008). In another study in Mali, students in classrooms that used children's first languages as the language of instruction were five times less likely to repeat the year and more than three times less likely to drop out (Bender et al., 2005). The chances of keeping children in school, then, are significantly improved if they can understand and learn productively in the language in the classroom.

##### **Improves Reading and Learning Outcomes**

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). Evidence from Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam, and elsewhere attests to the benefits of learning in a familiar language. Specifically, 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—125% on average—in multiple subjects (including math and English) than a control group of peers who attended schools where English was the medium of instruction (Chuo and Walter, 2011). In Vietnam, 68% of grade one students in a mothertongue program achieved the level of —excellent compared to only 28% of students not learning in their mother tongue (UNICEF, 2011). Similar results were achieved in a program in the Philippines, where children learning in their mother tongue showed statistically significant improvements in all subjects compared to children who were learning only in Filipino (Walter and Dekker, 2011).

### **Facilitates Learning a Second or Foreign Language**

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.

### **Improves Internal Educational Efficiency**

With the increased efficiency resulting from fewer students repeating, dropping out, or failing to learn, MTB education is also more cost-effective than monolingual models of education. One World Bank study in Mali found that MTB programs cost about 27% less for a 6-year primary cycle than French only programs (Bender et al., 2005). Another analysis shows that a 4–5% increase in a country's education budget would cover the immediate costs associated with mother tongue instruction and subsequently greatly reduce the education system's costs in the long run due to improved internal efficiency.

### **Improves Children's Self-Concept and Identity**

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).

### **Supports Local Culture and Parental Involvement**

Finally, 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.

## **5. MTBE Impacts on Quality of Schooling**

Well-documented empirical studies of mother tongue-based bilingual programs in developing countries began appearing in the 1970s and still form the basis of what is done in the field today.

### **Classroom Participation, Positive Affect and Increased Self-Esteem**

Observational data confirm differences between bilingual and non-bilingual classrooms worldwide. In contrast to students in submersion programs who sit listening or reciting, bilingual students participate more often in the classroom and demonstrate greater self-confidence and higher motivation (ADAE, 1996). The L1 allows children to express their full range of knowledge and experience and demonstrate their competence, which pedagogical approaches like those of Piaget and Vygotsky would support as productive for learning (Richardson 2001).

### **Increased Parent Participation**

Another outcome of bilingual programs is increased parent participation in school affairs, a situation likely to be related to the fact that they are allowed to use the L1 to speak to the teacher. In Bolivia, d'Emilio found that given a "real opportunity to participate in decision-making about their children's schooling, parents no longer think speaking to teachers is a 'waste of time,' nor are they ashamed of using their native language in these meetings" (1995: 85). Parent participation is a widely-cited factor in successful bilingual programs (Cummins 2000).

### **Increased Participation of Girls**

While the mechanisms remain to be explored, a number of studies (Hovens, 2003) have found that bilingual schooling has positive effects on girls' schooling in terms of higher enrolment and passing rates and

lower dropout rates. International research indicates that girls never get to school, or stop attending after only one to three years, due to various factors such as perceptions that they are less able than boys, or lack of trust in male teachers. Benson (2002) proposes that both internal and external impediments to girls' participation may be eliminated by use of the L1, because increased student-teacher communication allows girls to demonstrate their competence and teachers to see it, and increased parent-teacher communication increases trust in the teacher while exposing him to more social control.

## **6. Factors Must Be Considered in Planning Effective MTB Education Programs**

Implementing effective MTB education requires careful planning and commitment. According to Carole Benson (2004), factors to consider and steps to take to ensure your program is effective include the following:

### **Language Model**

One of the first factors to consider in identifying the appropriate MTB

education model is the education system's goals. For example, maintenance MTB programs aim to develop and maintain students' L1, even as they develop their L2 to proficiency, to ensure that the mother tongue is not lost. A maintenance program provides students instruction in both L1 and L2 through secondary school. The outcome is bilingual and biliterate students.

In contrast, transitional MTB programs use the students' first language to facilitate the acquisition of L2 or other language. The goal of transitional programs is to provide students with the oral and academic support they need to effectively move from instruction in L1 to instruction in L2. The amount of time L1 is used varies depending on the context, from 2 to 6 years of instruction in L1, to instruction in L1 for at least part of the day for 5–6 years.

### **Language Distribution**

Key questions regarding the distribution of languages spoken in a community need to be answered in order to design an effective program. For example, do children from different language groups have to share the same classroom or are they clustered geographically in monolingual areas? If not all children in a classroom are from the same language group, is there a common language that is spoken fluently by all children that could be used for instruction? The proportion of children who speak different languages and their fluency in these languages will determine which are used in the classroom and will drive teacher recruitment and materials development. An assessment of the languages spoken by the majority of learners and teachers can help guide the roll out of mother tongue programs in a given country, while ensuring that minority groups are not excluded from learning in a familiar language.

### **Teacher Recruitment and Preparation**

Availability of teachers who are speakers of the target languages (L1, L2, and L3 in some contexts) is also a key consideration for program development. Teachers will need to be proficient in both the L1 and L2 (or have classroom-based support from someone who is proficient in the other language); have knowledge of practices to teach the content areas in L1; have knowledge of practices to help students transfer skills from L1 to L2; and have knowledge of practices to teach and support children learning a second or foreign language. Quality pre- and continuous in-service training in the language(s) of instruction—as well as follow-up support, supervision, and monitoring and evaluation—will need to be provided to ensure they have the skills needed to provide effective mother tongue-based bi- or multilingual education.

### **Materials Development and Provision**

Materials for both teachers and students must be available in the language of instruction. To ensure quality materials are available, governments, donors, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) need to allow for adequate time to develop, pilot test, and evaluate mother tongue and second language materials.

Collaboration across national borders and between publishers, education ministries, language experts, NGOs, and communities can facilitate this process.

### **Parental Support**

Parents' support is essential to the success of a mother tongue education program. Therefore, parents need to be well informed about the benefits of MTB instruction and reassured that learning in the mother tongue will not hinder their children's opportunity to learn a foreign or national language, often a key goal of sending their children to school. Parents and communities should be included in decision making around program development and they also can contribute to materials development, provide support in classrooms, and conduct school oversight activities.

### **Education Sector Alignment**

To ensure the success of MTB education programs, governments must structure all aspects of the education system to be aligned in support of the chosen model. This includes ensuring that language is a key consideration in teacher recruitment, selection, pre service training, and school assignments. Moreover, pupil assessment must also match the language model used so that children are able to fully demonstrate their learning.

## **7. Conclusions**

Though there are still controversies of 'Why mother tongue based classroom education?', the rationales presented tend to incline to the advantages of using mother tongue especially at early grades. Even, some scholars clearly convince the importance of mother tongue to ensure the quality of education which is current the concern of Ethiopian education. Accordingly, stake holders should carefully notice how MT contributes for quality education and act accordingly to maximize its contributions.

Recently, in Ethiopia context, though there is an obvious need to develop of regional and local languages in order to enhance equity, this should not be done at the cost of further development and strengthening of languages of wider communication within the education system. But, the role of local languages in primary education should be appropriate to their actual patterns of use in society and to their existing range of functions. In line with this , it is very vital to consider the factors before planning and implementing MTB education program as it has great impact in the quality of the education system.

In education, one of the most important roles of using local languages should be to teach languages of wider communication. As many scholars agree that mother tongue is a base for learning second language (language of wider communication). This can also be a base to improve quality of English language teaching within the education system in order to ensure quality education in the primary education system which in turn contributes for the quality of secondary and tertiary education in Ethiopia.

Achieving quality in education should not be seen narrowly in terms of enrolment and access to primary education, or attainment, but in a broader context as preparation for life. The education system needs to capitalize on the range of opportunities that are open to students through education, rather than measuring success in terms of processing students through the education system, with the limited goal of accessing secondary and tertiary education. Mother tongue language primary education is, in any case, an inefficient means of securing access to continuing in education, since secondary and tertiary education are based upon the use of languages of wider communication. In order to maximize the efficacy of language development, education in local languages should be seen within the wider frame of national development.

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