
The Issue of Mother Tongue in Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to analyze the issue of mother tongue in Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia which has currently become a subject of concern for educationist, government and other stakeholders. To do this, as an introductory part, the paper briefly highlights the policy context of Ethiopian education system, particularly the aspect of language of preschool medium. Then, the article mainly focuses on the use of mother tongue in Early Childhood Education in relation to young children's learning and development, and the 'supremacy' and competing role of English language in preschools and its implication on children's overall development. Consequently, the findings indicate that the use of mother tongue medium at preschool is subjected to different interpretations and practices by service providers, professionals, teachers, parents and other due to many factors. Additionally, the global 'supremacy' of English language has a substantial effect on the detriment of mother tongue preschool education in Ethiopia. Finally, the paper provides conclusion and indicative suggestions based on critical analysis of related literature, policy documents, research findings, and reflections on observations and experiences.

Introduction

A wealth of research shows that "A strong predictor of L2 (second language) literacy development is L1 (mother tongue) literacy, and that additive bilingualism is associated with higher academic achievement than subtractive bilingualism" (Genesee et al., 2007 in Leung and Creese, 2010, p. 110). Although empirical researches and pragmatic experiences acknowledged and supported the benefits of mother tongue education, adequately addressing the language issue in the education system of multilingual countries like Ethiopia became complex, but attainable. In this context, the existing education policy of Ethiopia promotes the use of mother tongue education at primary school level. It encourages each ethnic and

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linguistic group to learn in their mother tongue from grade 1 through to grade 8 (TGE, 1994). It also supports multilingualism: “Students can choose and learn at least one national language and one foreign language for cultural and international relations” (TGE, p. 24). Accordingly, Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas (2010, p. 41) affirm that “The [Ethiopian] national policy for primary schooling is clearly in line with contemporary research which supports extended educational use of mother tongue and the addition of other languages through bi-or trilingual approaches...”.

However, regarding language of instruction at the pre-school level, the 1994’s Education and Training Policy document did not mention anything, and it could be blamed for not succinctly demonstrating or overlooking the use of mother tongue in early childhood education. Besides, official documents state that “...pre-primary school is not the priority of the Government under the current status of the country. As a result, this program (i.e. programs for preschoolers) can be covered by private, public, religious and other organizations” (MoE, 2002 in Tefera et al., 2009, p.197). Comparatively, a recent statement also indicates government’s minimum responsibility for direct intervention in pre-school education and its exclusive role on “promoting, coordinating, supporting and monitoring the involvement of other stakeholders” (MoE, 2010, p. 16). Moreover, the absence of a clear policy guideline for pre-school medium disregards the language issue at the foundation stage of children’s development. It also provides a space for different interpretations and fragmented practices, and adversely contributes to the low coverage and poor quality of early childhood education provision.

On the other hand, people could argue that mother tongue seems the medium of instruction in early childhood education by implication since the education policy recognizes the right of children to learn in their mother tongue at primary school. But this notion may lack credible evidence in view of the fact that the education policy, as a high level guiding document, should put in black and white ‘which language(s) is/are used in pre-school environment’ as it undoubtedly stipulated in primary education and onwards. Thus, the decision to employ mother tongue instruction at preschool should be made by design but not by default. Because, a clear policy statement

allows pre-school providers to refer and utilize the policy as a general guideline to facilitate effective implementation and monitoring, conduct supervision and keep the standard of provisions across the country. In support of this, Thompson (2000, p. 37) asserts that “Without an official policy statement, it is not possible to monitor the impact and changes that are taking place. It is also difficult to ensure that all children are receiving the education best suited to their needs”. Nevertheless, in reaction to the limitation of education provision of early years and endeavors of UNICEF, Save the Children, Addis Ababa University, Kotobe College of Teacher Education and others, the government initiated and launched the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework (MoE, 2010). This was expected to improve access and quality of early years care and development across the country; however, it has not been adequately executed yet.

The Use of Mother Tongue in Early Childhood Education

Languages are considered as the foundation of human legacies, the tool that enables people to express and represent their world and they are also the symbols of identity and an essential part of society (Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010). Similarly, Gregerson et al. (2009, p. 336) say that “Each language reflects a unique world view and culture complex mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy, and understanding of the world around it”. In this regard, mother tongue plays an important role in conceptualizing and interpreting our world. Mother tongue is defined by different scholars in different ways. Among many authorities, Calvet (1987) describes mother tongue as “The language of the biological mother or father, or a local vehicular language” (in Phillipson, 2000, p.39). Gregerson et al. (2009, p. 360) also define mother tongue as “a language which is spoken at home”. Despite its significant roles, the issue of mother tongue has been a subject of debate and discussion among scholars and laypeople in the past and even today (Spolsky, 1986). In this respect, there are conflicting arguments that stand in favour of and against mother tongue education. For instance, with regard to misconceptions of mother tongue

instruction amongst parents in Ethiopia, in his research, Gebre (2005) points out that:

The use of 'less developed' languages in education will impair learners cognitive development...The use of mother tongues including Amharic as [medium of instruction] for grade 7 and 8 science and mathematics will disadvantage learners who go on to English medium secondary schooling. (In Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010, pp. 47-48)

However, there are many professionals who support mother tongue education in promoting children's learning and development (Mackenzie, 2009). Denying minority children's mother tongue education is "Violation of children's educational and linguistic human rights" (Magga et al., 2005; Dunbar et al., 2006 in Garcia et al., 2006, p. 21). Besides, several essential linguistic human rights are centrally associated to mother tongues (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 106). Hence, it is undeniable that mother tongue education has a social, pedagogical and psychological advantage for learners.

As Pattanayak (1986) states, in multilingual countries like Ethiopia, there is enough evidence that a child picks up two or more languages from their environment and community since "Children learn language through their interaction with adults" (Bruner, 1977 in Pang, 2001, p. 24) and peers. Thus, it is apparent that in a diverse society, children come to school with a variety of linguistic backgrounds. However, the education system of many countries fails to provide equal opportunity for all children. In this connection, some of the children's mother tongue may fit with the medium of education in schooling and the others, particularly the minority languages, may not. In the latter case, it has a devastating impact on children's learning and development. In support of mother tongue education, Byram and Leman (1990, p. 74) also assert that "By giving a mother tongue a meaningful role to play in education, the school system will go a long way towards providing a truly enriching academic experience for minority-language children".

Conversely, children whose mother tongue is disregarded in the preschool instruction are at a loss in many ways. For instance, Pattanayak (1977) points out that it is depriving of one of the fundamental human rights if they are excluded from their mother tongue education (Spolsky, 1986).

Moreover, mother tongue education provides children a sense of emotional stability in the school settings, and more benefits from schooling in concentrating on their learning and effectively grasping knowledge, skills and attitudes. This, in turn, leads to overall academic success and enhances lifelong learning (Byram and Leman, 1990). However, it is unfortunate that “The difference between languages that children learn in home and the languages valued by society and established ... as the medium of instruction at the various levels of schools is almost universal problem in educational systems” (Spolsky, 1986, p.1). Accordingly, the preschools operate differently as a result of many factors in Ethiopia. From observations and experiences, one can easily understand that urban preschools are more likely to employ foreign languages (mostly English), and disregard children’s mother tongue. A study conducted related to this also confirms that:

About 8.3 % of the sample preschools use English as a medium of instruction, about 44 .4% use partly the mother tongue, 22 % of the preschool teachers preferred English to be the medium of instruction and about 91% of parents preferred English to be the medium of instruction at preschool (Tefera et al., 2009, pp. 206-207).

This undoubtedly substantiates that in some preschools English is used as a medium of instruction, and some preschools use children’s mother tongue along with English as a language of instruction. However, the diverse linguistic backgrounds of children which are considered as a resource for children’s learning and development are devalued in preschool settings. Additionally, as the above data indicate, knowingly or unknowingly the impact of denying mother tongue education on young children’s overall development, teachers and parents accepted and promoted non-mother

tongue instruction for young children. Indeed, this account needs further thoughtfulness by all concerned with regard to children's better learning and development, and meaningful and long-term human capital development. It is rigorously believed that whether it is a foreign or a national language, non-mother tongue instruction for young children is entirely against the principle of children's learning and development. In line with this, Pattanayak (1986, p.5) says that non-mother tongue education creates "Stunted cognitive growth and lack of creativity and innovativeness in children and the atrophy of indigenous cultures". Tucker (1999) also asserts that "Individuals most easily develop cognitive skills and master content material when they are taught in a familiar language" (Garcia and Baker, 2007, p.8). Hence, mother tongue education entails a considerable effect on cognitive, emotional, social, physical and language development.

Likewise, research has demonstrated that students who learn in their mother tongue exhibited a significantly better academic performance (Garcia and Baker, 2007). Additionally, "Education which begins in the mother tongue and builds competence in the second language before using it as the medium of instruction... is a key component in increasing the educational attainment of speakers of minority languages" (Mackenzie, 2009, p. 369). Besides, the impressive advantage of mother tongue education in a diverse society is to employ it as a "conversational lubricant" (Butzkamm, 1998 in Bonacina and Gafaranga, 2011, p. 324). Therefore, it is essential to perceive mother tongue education as a resource for the learner and the society as a whole rather than negatively affecting children's learning and societal development.

Furthermore, Phillipson (2000, p. 187) claims that, "A monolingual methodology is organically linked with linguistic disregard of dominant languages, concepts, and ways of thinking". A strong assertion by Garcia and Baker (2007, p. 33) also disclosed that "When even one language falls silent, the world loses an irredeemable repository of human knowledge". By the same token, Gregerson and his colleagues point out that "... with the death and disappearance of such a language, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world view is lost

forever” (Gregerson et al., 2009, p. 366). In this context, education system plays an exceptional role in promoting or downgrading mother tongue education.

Unfortunately, “The education of most minorities and indigenous peoples in the world is organized in ways which ... lead to the disappearance of linguistic and cultural diversity...Schools are committing every day linguistic genocide” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. x). Thus, minority languages will be lost if their speakers choose non-mother tongue medium of instruction or shift to dominant languages at the expense of their mother tongues (Garcia et al., 2006). Indeed, the issue of mother tongue instruction in preschool settings should align with the statement of Pugh and Duffy (2006) who spell out that the education system holds a great responsibility in rescuing and revitalizing the minority languages through developing appropriate and genuine education policy and introducing mother tongue education in preschool which is the foundation stage of children’s learning and development. Moreover, all children have the right to access to a curriculum that supports and affirms their cultural and linguistic identities and backgrounds. Educators, community and preschool teachers should also be responsible in scrutinizing their own values, attitudes and prejudices, and learn to deal with them in positive ways. Thus, the next section of the article will deal with the ‘supremacy’ of English language in preschools in Ethiopia.

The ‘Supremacy’ of English in Early Childhood Education

According to Phillipson (2000, pp.5-6), “At the present time English, to a much greater extent than any other language ... [is the one] in which the fate of most of the world’s million[s] is decided. English has, in the twentieth century, become the international language *par excellence*”. In this regard, it becomes “The main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science and technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising” (Crystal, 1987, in Pennycook, 1994, p. 8). Thus, as a result of the hegemonic nature of English language and globalization, the world’s linguistic and cultural variety seems to be under attack, and the role of indigenous languages in the education system is being questioned (Garcia and Baker, 2007). These inevitable pressures enormously affect the fortune of minority and other languages, cultures, identities, and educational rights of children to mother tongue education.

Many countries of the world adopt English as a medium of instruction or provide it as a second language to their citizens. For instance, over 130 million children study English as a second language globally, excluding China (Crystal, 1987 in Pennycook, 1994). Accordingly, the English language has been given an important position in Ethiopian education system, and the education policy pays due attention to learn English as the means of international communication (TGE, 1994). Hence, in the entire country, English is officially delivered starting from grade one (the statutory primary school age, 7th birth day) as a subject and serves as a medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels.

However, as it was mentioned earlier, English is used as a medium of instruction in preschools in Ethiopia within a blurred preschool language policy environment. Partly, this was undertaken as a result of teachers’ and parents’ misconceptions and inflated aspirations towards English language proficiency as confirmed by the outcomes of the study (Tefera et al., 2009). As a concrete example, preschool directors were very proud of saying “Our school is an English medium” (Tefera et al., 2009p. 207). Although it is a

distressing idea, it appears difficult to blame preschool teachers with regard to their misconceptions on the medium of English instruction at preschool. Because most of them are inadequately trained for their position compared with the complex and demanding nature of early years teaching, and their understanding about young children's language learning and development is limited (Demelash, 2011). The ambiguity of the policy with regard to the language of early childhood education also leads preschool providers to use English as a medium of instruction. Moreover, inadequate supervision and monitoring of the education personnel contributed to the exclusion of mother tongue education in the preschool environment (Demelash, 2011). However, the government should hold a huge responsibility and accountability for providing appropriate and quality early childhood education for young children. In this respect, the development actors could also play a significant role.

Regarding parents choice of English as a medium of instruction in preschool, it results from the part played by English in social and economic prestige. In line of this, Pennycook (1994, p. 14) points out that:

English functions as a gate keeper to positions of prestige in a society. With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions.

Thus, in the urban Ethiopian context, it is not uncommon to observe the eagerness of many parents to see their young children being more proficient in English language than their mother tongue. In some cases, unless children speak, read and write in English at their level, parents do not feel that their children have learned meaningful strands in preschool. In addition, the efficiency of teachers and preschools is questionable if children do not show their proficiency of English (reading and writing words and simple phrases, speaking, singing, counting, etc.), rather than that of their mother

tongue. Indeed, observation and experience reveal that, parent's choice of preschool or the 'best' preschool is rated based on its ability to make young children proficient in English. It is difficult to come across parents who look for preschools for their young children that provide 'best' education in the indigenous languages. Saying 'my young child speaks English well' is a sign of pride and excellence. Moreover, it is surprising to observe that Ethiopian Television (ETV) advertising for public is often made by foreigners who advocate 'English medium of instruction in preschool'.

Furthermore, "For many generations, bilingual students had been punished for any use of their L1 (mother tongue) in the school context and were discriminated against in virtually all areas of education, from segregated schools to biased curriculum and assessment practices" (Garcia and Baker, 2007, p. 109). Similarly, the official government media in 2009 demonstrates that, 'Some preschools ban children from speaking their mother tongue in the preschool compound, and young children were punished for doing so'. The billboard of an anonymous preschool was quoted as '**Throwing stone at someone and speaking language other than English in preschool is strictly forbidden**' (Ethiopian Television Media Conference, 2009). This is a good indicator of misconceptions and low understandings about mother tongue education and bilingualism. Its adverse effort is not only against the government policy which promotes mother tongue education as a general framework but also negates children's human rights. Above all, it leads children to develop negative attitudes towards their mother tongues and discourages them from developing their culture, language and identity. Consequently, it has short and long-term undesirable effects on children's academic achievement and overall development. In this circumstance, Garcia and Baker (2007) argue that instead of developing a sense of pride, preschools promoted a sense of shame with regard to children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, as far as my observation and experience are concerned, all sections of the society, educated/uneducated, poor/rich, officials/ordinary people...are hovering in that circle of thinking and considering English medium of instruction as the best quality education that preschool should

offer for young children. As a result, at the expense of mother tongue education, with no or little promotion cost, foreign language has been successfully promoted in Ethiopian preschools. To sum up my thought, I have no doubt with exposing children to international language, and its importance, future career progression and international communication. However, we should conscience and merit the thought of Pang (2001, pp. 23-24) who says, "It is important...to value the language children bring to school because their language is like a cultural blanket... It is through language that children relate to family, community members, and other individuals" and it is through their language that children contribute towards sustainable development of their community and nation. As a final thought, considering its benefits and utilizing mother tongue education in early childhood education is an uncompromising educational and development decision. It has an invaluable contribution for quality education provision upon which further learning will be built. To do so, among others, teachers need to be reflective and creative and employ a wide range of teaching strategies that address the diverse needs of young children in classroom. Parents could also play an irreplaceable role for children's learning and overall development. They could involve in the real teaching-learning process through storytelling, imparting their culture, dance and music and bringing relevant children's videos, books, tapes, pictures and other educational objects from their home for effective and quality early childhood education (Kenner, 2000).

Conclusion

Ethiopia is the home of multicultural and multilingual society, and it is certain that children come to school from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Based on this diverse context, the Ethiopian education system promotes mother tongue and multilingual education at primary education and onwards. In this respect, Ethiopia has best experiences that could be shared for the rest of the world. However, the Ethiopian education system has failed to look inwards and learn from its own best practices of primary education and replicate to the preschool settings. Consequently, the

medium of instruction at preschool has become vague and subjected to different interpretations by service providers, professionals, teachers, parents and other stakeholders. Additionally, the global 'supremacy' of English language has a considerable effect on mother tongue preschool education. Teachers' and parents' misconceptions about mother tongue instruction and high and inflated aspiration for children's high level of English proficiency and its association with future children's academic and career progress also exert high pressure to the detriment of mother tongue in early childhood education in Ethiopia.

Therefore, since provision of quality preschool education is a joint responsibility, preschools, teachers, parents, professionals and government have to bring all their endeavors together and take part their own role. Children could also play their own part in promoting their learning and development. Indeed, the government has to enforce the existing Early Childhood Care and Education policy framework and effectively monitor its implementation for better outcomes. Moreover, it is relevant to advance the competence of preschool teachers on how young children learn and impacts of culture and language on holistic child development, and raise the awareness level of parents towards mother tongue education for young children's learning and development. Finally, promoting applicable partnerships among children, teachers, parents, government and other development actors is indispensable to address the language issues and deliver quality early childhood education in Ethiopia. Thus, based on conducive policy environment, create discussion forum with all concerned stakeholders and share agreed duties and responsibilities of each partner is vital for effective implementation of mother tongue education in preschools in Ethiopia.

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