
A Special Issue on Language Education and Use in Early Grades in Ethiopia

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Introduction

Ethiopia presents one of the most fascinating and complex language education and language-in-education situations in Africa with its bold attempt to implement close to 48 languages in formal education at various levels and formats. While some of the major languages, such as Amharic and Afan Oromo are used from early years to postgraduate education, others, such as Aari, are only recently introduced into formal education and are taught as a subject only in primary education. Some of these languages have been written languages for many years and pride of extensive literary resources, while others have only recently been converted into written form and introduced into formal education, resulting in scarce written resources. The language issue in early years' education has direct implications for the quality of education. However, it has not been adequately investigated in a way that addresses the multifaceted and interdisciplinary nature of the topic. Interdisciplinary research and a closer examination of how these complex factors related to literacy and language education impact the quality of early years' education in Ethiopia are scarce. This special issue of the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* presents original research and findings on the context of selected Ethiopian languages and their implementation in early literacy and education, including Sidaamu Afoo, Gofa, Koorete, Af Somali, Amharic, and Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL).

Although great strides have been made in Ethiopia over the last three decades in expanding education and making it relevant and meaningful through the use of local languages, several studies suggest that the quality of early and primary education in Ethiopia is in crisis. There is no better evidence to illustrate this than studies showing the state of reading skills in primary schools across Ethiopia. The 2018 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) report for Ethiopia reveals a significant crisis in early grade reading proficiency, with many students struggling to acquire basic reading skills. The assessment, covering grades 2 and 3 in five regions and seven languages, found that a substantial percentage of students could not read a single word, with slight

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regional disparities (EGRA 2018). All the studied regions exhibited particularly high rates of young children unable to read at grade level, which has serious implications for their continued learning. Several studies, therefore, emphasize the urgent need for policy and pedagogical reforms to improve early grade reading outcomes, highlighting the importance of targeted interventions to address these challenges and enhance early literacy development across Ethiopia.

Language education and use in early years and primary schools in Ethiopia continue to be complex and controversial topics. Several factors contribute to this challenging scenario, including the country's linguistic diversity, with nearly 90 spoken languages, the difficult-to-implement language-in-education policy, and the continually evolving curriculum. While the country's linguistic and cultural diversity could be an asset in many ways, the lack of research-based policy and implementation, systematic and interdisciplinary knowledge production and the absence of adequate educational resources have hindered efforts to improve the situation. Moreover, the shortage of well-trained and professional teachers equipped to teach languages appropriate to the level has been a significant bottleneck to effective language education during the early years of schooling. These issues collectively impact the quality of education and the ability of young children to achieve literacy and academic success.

Teachers are the foundation of any education system, and have the capacity to bring about significant improvements to the quality of education if they are properly trained, professionalized, and supported. Despite some progress in recent years, teacher training programs for several languages in Ethiopia have not successfully prepared teachers to use state-of-the-art reading instruction techniques or to incorporate local knowledge and context to enrich learning and make it relevant (Weldemariam, K., Sandvik, M., & Yigezu, M. 2023). This has created a gap between the training provided and the challenges faced on the ground, resulting in poor language development skills and low levels of foundational reading and writing proficiency among children—key precursors for future academic and life success. To complicate things further, hastily prepared orthographies with minimal professional involvement have made early literacy acquisition in many languages difficult. There is also a lack of well-prepared teaching and learning materials, as well as supplementary resources necessary to foster a love for reading and a reading culture among young children.

This special issue brings together studies examining different aspects of language education and language-in-education in Ethiopia, focusing on early literacy development and, to some extent, early numeracy practices and challenges. Their main focus is on interconnected issues concerning the effectiveness of early-grade reading instruction and literacy practices. These include teachers' instructional methods, the content of educational materials such as textbooks and teacher guides, the impact of different writing systems on reading skill development, and the quality and suitability of children's books. The instructional methods and classroom practice are examined through case studies of languages like Koorete, Gofa, and Af Somali, while the analysis of textbook content and orthographic influence draws from Amharic, Sidaamu Afoo, and English as a second language. The evaluation and assessment of children's books for age-appropriateness, relevance, and overall quality is conducted on children's books published in Amharic. Furthermore, one of the studies addresses the challenges of imparting basic literacy skills to deaf children and policy-related issues using Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) as a case study.

The special issue begins with a case study on teachers' instructional practice in the context of the Koorete language by Samuel and Binyam that examined the level of phonological awareness of grade 1 teachers of the Koorete language and how they teach phonological awareness skills in the early grades. The study found that grade 1 teachers lack a basic understanding of the various components of phonological awareness skills and have little knowledge of what to teach and how to teach these skills in the early grades. A critical gap has been identified in teachers' interactional practice in using explicit and systematic planning and integrating the key components of phonological awareness activities into the classroom. The challenge can be traced back to the minimal training teachers receive during their pre-service education and the lack of continuous professional development schemes, which would keep them updated as approaches evolve.

Yet another case study on teachers' instructional practices focusing on Gofa language was done by Zerihun, Moges and Romøren. The study deals with the classroom instructional practices of teachers and the challenges they face in teaching phonological awareness. The findings of the study underscore that instructional practices are compounded by various challenges, including a low level of teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness, a lack of positive attitude and motivation, inadequate educational resources, and limited parental and community involvement. The study concludes that in order to address

these challenges, providing ongoing professional support to enhance teachers' phonological knowledge and capacities would be required. It is interesting that both the case studies of Koorete by Samuel and Binyam, and on Gofa by Zerihun, Moges and Romøren, reach similar conclusions, suggesting that the predicament and its sources are more widespread.

Abraha conducted a study on the causal correlations of number identification and numeracy with letter naming and literacy in schools with Af Somali medium of instruction. By employing a correlational design, the study examines whether letter naming and number identification have important implications for numeracy and literacy learning, respectively. The results of the study suggested limited predictive powers for practical purposes. Whereas linear regressions carried out taking sex and types of community yielded statistically significant contributions of type of community, favoring refugee context, on letter naming and literacy learning only. Further large-scale follow-up studies are suggested to validate the findings and the possible implications for curriculum design and teacher development practices.

An article by Nigistie and Moges focused on reading instructions in grade 1 and made a critical assessment of the content presentation of the grade 1 Amharic language textbook and the accompanying teacher's guide. The study focused on three activities of reading instructions, namely, phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary development, and examined the coverage of each activity in the textbook and in the teacher's guide. It also points out important elements lacking in the materials that could potentially affect the literacy competencies and the future academic lives of the child learners. It concludes by recommending that, in order for the children to be exposed to adequate literacy elements, the materials need to include more relevant content in terms of phonological and vocabulary components.

Then, the influence of orthography in early grade reading was examined by Samrawit and Abraha based on the Latin-based Sidaamu Afoo orthography and English. The study examined the influence of orthography in the mother tongue (Sidaamu Afoo) and in the second language (English) by focusing on two reading tasks, i.e., letter/grapheme name identification and grapheme-sound identification tasks. The result of the study indicated some variance in frequency distribution across the graphemes by language. Students named the Sidaamu Afoo letters instead of the English ones, and vice versa. Similar confusion was identified in the letter-sound correspondence task. In this task, digraphs were registered as a source of confusion in the two languages. Such

bidirectional influence of the orthographies of the targeted languages because of the use of Latin-based script without harmonization has important implications for classroom instruction and curriculum organizations.

Given that mother tongue education in multiple languages is currently implemented in Ethiopian primary schools in 48 local languages, the challenge of producing children's books in all these languages is a huge and daunting task that requires enormous effort and resources. Lack of pedagogically proper and quality reading books for children in early grades has been cited as one of the causes of the poor performance of reading skills in Ethiopian schools (EGRA 2018). For some major languages, such as Amharic, children's books have been published since the 1960s. Over the last three decades or so, more children's books have been seen on the market, which are published by quite a few professional and semi-professional authors. The quality and relevance of these children's books have never been systematically evaluated. The paper by Baylegegn tries to fill in this crucial gap by providing a systematic evaluation based on randomly selected 28 children's books published in Amharic over the span of four decades. The study investigates whether the existing books meant for children are age-appropriate from the perspective of the cognitive and linguistic development of children and discusses the deficiencies and limitations of these books in light of multidisciplinary perspectives.

The research paper by Elizabeth and Moges explores policy and practice in relation to the use of the Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) in the delivery of basic education and conducting literacy in schools for the deaf and critically evaluates recent developments in recognizing and employing the language in early grades. Even if the last three decades witnessed notable improvements, the study highlighted the lack of proper recognition of the Ethiopian Sign Language as a full-fledged language being used as the first language of the deaf children. The study further asserts that EthSL is the mother tongue of many deaf children and needs to be acknowledged and officially recognized as such in the national policies touching the deaf community in one way or another, and even more in the education sector, where the quality of early reading and literacy is declining at an alarming rate. The study recommends a reevaluation of existing policies and practices related to the education of deaf children and the full recognition of the EthSL as the mother tongue or first language of deaf children in Ethiopia.

All the studies in this special issue are based on original fieldwork data and cover diverse aspects of early literacy, from early grade reading instruction

techniques to teacher training and practice, and from policy-related issues to the availability and quality of teaching and supplementary materials. It is hoped that the volume will make a humble contribution to stir more debates and discussions on the subject from interdisciplinary perspectives. The editor and authors of the articles wish to express their profound gratitude to the financial support provided by Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) to conduct these research under its NORHED program for the project ‘BEYOND ACCESS: Improving Quality of Early Years Reading Instructions in Ethiopia and South Sudan’ (QZA-0483 ETH16/0028).

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