Predicaments in Employing Ethiopian Sign Language as Mother Tongue of Deaf Children

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the use of Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) as a mother tongue in the education of deaf children while also revealing some of the challenges encountered in this field. The study utilized qualitative methods, such as observations, document analysis, and interviews with school staff and government officials. The findings highlighted that EthSL is not yet acknowledged and accepted as a full language of education like other Ethiopian languages. Lack of curriculum, textbooks, trained teachers, allotted periods, and other necessary inputs are some of the manifestations of its exclusion. The study also revealed that the dominant inclusive education approach was not tailored to the specific sociolinguistic needs of deaf students. Consequently, the Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) for Mother Tongue (MT) education of deaf children in schools is neither promoted nor protected. These results suggest a critical need to reevaluate current policies and practices.

Keywords: Mother Tongue (MT), deaf education, Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL), Linguistic Human Rights (LHR), Inclusive Education (IE)

1. Introduction

In multilingual Ethiopia, with over 80 spoken languages, Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) is the only signed language primarily used by the deaf community. Despite being under-researched, EthSL is a natural and independent language with its own grammatical structures (Andargachew, 2021; Pawlos, 2021; and Woinshet, 2021). Except for a for a few lexical differences, evidence (Pawlos, 2014: 74) indicates that EthSL varieties used in different regions and schools throughout Ethiopia are mutually intelligible, regardless of the differences in the spoken languages in their surroundings. However, some people still doubt EthSL is a 'real' language (Eyasu, 2015), as with many sign languages (hereafter SLs) worldwide (Krausneker, 2015: 416).

The Ethiopian National Association for the Deaf (ENAD) claims there are at least 3.5 million deaf people in Ethiopia based on WHO's[3] (2021) estimation.

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[3] According to the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2021) estimation, more than 5% of the world's population has some kind of hearing loss.

The number indicates users of EthSL can be counted numerically among some majority spoken languages in Ethiopia, which entails receiving official attention. However, it is not common to find EthSL in language-related discourses, including policy and legal documents (Elizabeth, 2021) and lists of languages of education (USAID, 2021; Heugh et al., 2007). The Deaf have never been counted as a distinctive linguistic community as users of EthSL (CSA, 2007), which leads to the question whether EthSL is in fact considered a language.

Since the inception of the first school for the deaf in Ethiopia in the early 1960's, SLs[4] have been utilized as a means of communication in deaf education. For about four decades, however, limited progress was observed in making education accessible for the deaf. The number of schools that admit deaf students became available, and progress has started to be observed since 2010, when Ethiopia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN), prompting a revision of the Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education Strategy in 2012. As part of the process of implementing Inclusive Education (IE), deaf students are allowed to enroll in selected mainstream schools. In those schools, the use of signings[5] became common (Elizabeth, 2021). The existence of deaf students in different schools and the use of signs started to be noticed then. Those incidents give many, including some experts in the area, the impression that the deaf are getting 'full' access to education, though the statistics still indicate their low participation. The highest score achieved in the school enrollment rate of children with disabilities (including the deaf) is only 1.7% (in pre-primary) and 8.0% (in primary) in the 2020/21 academic year (MOE, 2021:68–67). Empirical research (Haualand and Allen, 2009) also indicates that there is still limited access to education for the deaf, partly because of limited access to SL.

In the mentioned reports and researches, the details of the language-related problems are left unexamined. This research gap and other problems observed by the researcher led this study to aim at a detailed examination of how EthSL is currently employed as Mother Tongue (hereafter MT) in deaf education,

[4] Foreign SLs, specifically American, Finish, and Swedish SLs, were the languages used in the first schools for the deaf until Ethiopian teachers took over the teaching positions and employed EthSL. In addition, use of SLs was limited to very few special schools for the deaf (ENAD, 2017).

[5] The term 'signing', used in this article, refers to different manual means of communication, including artificial signs like signed Amharic, signed exact English, etc. Sign language (SL), on the other hand, is used to refer to the natural SL of the deaf community, like Ethiopian Sign Language or American Sign Language.

focusing on preprimary (also known as kindergarten) and the first four primary from a sociolinguistic point of view. To achieve this major objective and explore the dilemma, it investigated how education of the deaf and the schools were framed, the medium of instruction and language subjects selected and used, inputs to implement allocated SL like the curriculum, teachers, and other materials in comparison with other MTs in use, and how these promoted and protected the LHRs of the deaf children.

2. Review of Related Literature

Research indicates more than 90% of the deaf are born to hearing parents who don't share their first language or MT with them (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016; De Meulder, M. et al., 2019). Based on this particular sociolinguistic situation, MT for the deaf is redefined as a language that they identify with and can express themselves fully in (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016: 596). As Skutnabb-Kangas (ibid.) elaborates, the definition of MT can vary depending on the criteria used. Accordingly, using identification and competence as the main criteria, SL can be taken as the MT or first language of the deaf, as they identify with it as a native user and know it well. Unlike their hearing counterparts, deaf children don't acquire it mostly from their parents at home. Schools are the domain to acquire their first SL (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016: 595; Eyasu, 2016: 308). Consequently, particular attention to the teaching of SLs at school is essential to creating a secure linguistic environment to develop them (Hult and Compton, 2012:607). In contrast, research indicates schools are hardly playing this role (De Meulder, 2015: 167). As a critical space for intergenerational and horizontal language transmission, particularly those of special schools for the deaf, it is not well recognized (De Meulder & Murray, 2017). Their role as an informal learning domain, through interaction with other signers, is also worth attention.

Policies and legislations of countries are accordingly expected to recognize SLs as a MT of deaf children to promote their practical use. Where, how, when, and why SL and other additional spoken or SLs should be used in their education can be clarified in the general language and educational policies or other directing policies to address existing dilemmas in deaf education. In Sweden, for instance, the national education and special education policies clearly stated which languages, how, and when SL and Swedish should be used in deaf education as mediums of instruction, communication, and subjects within bilingual education approaches (Hult and Compton, 2012). The policies also clearly indicate the options the deaf can have to be admitted

to special schools or mainstream schools, where a modified curriculum is available in both contexts. Unlike Sweden, many countries in the world exclude SL policies or don't provide clear direction (Haualand and Allen, 2009; Mpuang et al., 2015; Mweri, 2016; Krausneker et al., 2020). Similarly, an Ethiopian study indicates EthSL is not officially recognized as the MT of deaf children (Elizbeth, 2021). It is not listed as one of the Ethiopian languages in the existing language-related policy and legal document, except in the FDRE Language Policy (2020). The FDRE Language Policy (MOCT, 2020:12) explicitly acknowledges the territorial rights of 'nationals with hearing impairments' to use EthSL for the first time. This policy, however, does not clearly show whether it's a MT of deaf children that can be medium in education, while clearly declaring the right of MT education for nations, nationalities, and people (2020: 11–13 and 19–23). Special Needs Education and disability-related policies (MOE, 2012; MOLSA, 2012), which can grant implicit recognition for a language (De Meulder, 2015), on the other hand, determined SL primarily as an assistive communication tool, not as a language (Elizbeth, 2021), which have different implications for practices in the Ethiopian context. These gaps imply that EthSL's role as a language of education is still in question as it doesn't have proper official support yet.

The FDRE Ministry of Culture and Sport reported on the 2021 Mother Tongue Day celebration that 53 spoken languages are now serving as mediums of instruction for primary education in Ethiopia. This and other reports on the medium of instruction excluded EthSL (Heugh et al., 2007; USAID, 2021). In the government structure, like the MT education division at FDRE MOE and Regions Education Bureaus, there are no experts for EthSL but for other spoken languages delivered as MT. It is not deniable that there have been improvements in the number of schools that attempt to employ sign language in the education of the deaf from time to time. However, this paper argues that EthSL is not in use in the same way or status as other Ethiopian languages (i.e., spoken languages), which are recognized as MT.

A review done on previous studies indicates that most research in relation to SL and deaf education in Ethiopia is carried out from special needs and IE perspectives, which is different from studying SL as a language and the deaf as a language community. In those studies, EthSL is not particularly identified and examined as a language and MT but as a communication tool or means to make education accessible through interpreting for the 'hearing impaired' in inclusive classes (Tadesse & Dawit, 2019; Mekonnen, 2018; Sewalem & Aynie, 2016; Alemayehu, 2016). All the research reviewed indicates that there

are communications problems connected with SL use, though they didn't examine in detail the linguistic issue and provide recommendations that can address the language-related problem properly. From the few studies available on EthSL from a linguistics perspective, most focus on its linguistic description. Pawlos's (2021) study focuses on some aspects of morphology, Woinshet's (2021) study on semantics, and Andargachew's (2021) study on phonology of EthSL. The sociolinguistic studies available focus on official recognition of EthSL by Elizabeth (2021) and a sociolinguistics survey of EthSL use and attitude by Eyasu (2015). None of them examines the practice of employing EthSL as MT in primary education from a sociolinguistic perspective. Consequently, this research contributes to filling this gap and will be an input for future policy formulation and implementation.

3. Paradigm and Conceptual Frameworks of the Study

This study was primarily guided by the Sociocultural Paradigm of deafness. In addition, it employs Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) and MT education as conceptual frameworks to evaluate how EthSL is employed.

3.1. Sociocultural Paradigm of Deafness

Pathological and Sociocultural Paradigms are the two contesting paradigms in conceptualizing deafness. The popular Pathological Paradigm rooted in medical models with the basic premise that deafness is primarily a disability, while the Sociocultural Paradigm takes it as a difference in linguistic, social, and cultural condition within the regular human variation based on anthropological models (Muzsnai, 1999; Padden and Humphries, 2005; Lane, 2008; Regean, 2008; and De Meulder, 2015). Unlike the common characterization of the deaf as individuals with hearing impairment, advocates of the Sociocultural Paradigm state, "Deaf refers to a member of a linguistic and cultural minority with distinctive mores, attitudes, and values and a distinctive physical constitution (Lane, 2008: 284)." Accordingly, the deaf are linguistic minorities with distinctive language and culture from their mainstream speech community, including other persons with disabilities. Since the 1960s, advocates of the sociocultural paradigm have contested the premise of the common pathological view, ". . . on the idea that deaf people are not only different from hearing people, but that they are, at least in a physiological sense, inferior to hearing people (Reagan, Matlinsc, and Pielickc, 2021:40)*."*

These paradigms, which are beyond models or theory (Reagan, 2010), have implications for policy formulation and implementation as they determine where the deaf should be grouped, what kind of educational rights and support they are entitled to, how those rights can be enforced, and so on (Reagan, Matlinsc, and Pielickc, 2021). A policy oriented toward the pathological paradigm may focus on their special needs, so that may give little or no attention to the teaching of SL as a language, MT, and also protect LHRs of its users. Therefore, granting LHRs the prerequisite of conceptualizing the deaf as a linguistic minority and recognizing SL as a language and MT as part of the sociocultural paradigm is crucial.

The sociocultural paradigm selected to frame this study allows examining EthSL with linguistic parameters as a fully-fledged language that can be used in MT education and the deaf as a linguistic minority entitled to LHRs. This paper argues that one of the gaps in previous research on SL in Ethiopia is not examining it with linguistic parameters as a language, beyond considering it as a communication tool.

3.2. Linguistic Human Rights and Mother Tongue Education

Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) is a concept that emerged in the 1980s. Some language rights (LRs) are necessary rights and therefore should be considered within the human rights (hereafter HRs) framework for more protection and attention. As the proponent of this framework, Skutnabb-Kangas (2006: 273) describes:

> Linguistic human rights (LHRs) combine language rights (LRs) with human rights (HRs). LHRs are those (and only those) LRs that, first, are necessary to fulfill people's basic needs and for them to live a dignified life, and second, that therefore are so basic, so fundamental, that no state (or individual or group) is supposed to violate them.

Accordingly, not all LRs are human rights. But those necessary, which are highly connected with the basic needs of a person and affect other basic rights, are LHRs, so they are entitled to state protection with other fundamental rights. There are individual and collective LHRs Skutnabb-Kangas (2000 and 2006) and other scholars (Krausneker, 2008) identify. Access to MT (s), MT education, the right to language-related identities, including the right to identify with the language of one's preference, identify positively and maintain and fully develop it, access to official language(s), and the right to be protected from forced shift to dominant languages, are among the fundamental

ones (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 498; Krausneker, 2008: 9). Allotment of financial resources to achieve the mentioned rights and being represented in decision-making are also other important aspects of LHRs.

MT education is one of the core LHRs every child is entitled to. Since SL is the MT of deaf children, they have the right to get education through it (CRPD, Article 24) like other linguistic minorities. Yet, MT education is associated with spoken languages, and evidence indicates many countries exclude the deaf from linguistic minority discourse (Krausneker, 2015) and SL as the language of education (De Meulder, Murray, and McKeen, 2019). Based on the right to MT education granted officially to all children in Ethiopia (MOE, 1994; MOE, 2018; MOCT, 2020; and MOE 2020), how far deaf children are treated equitably is among the issues addressed in this study.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design for a detailed examination (Creswell, 2009: 35) of how EthSL is employed as MT for deaf children. Since one of the gaps in previous studies (Eyasu, 2015; Tadesse & Dawit, 2019; Mekonnen, 2018; Sewalem & Aynie, 2016) was a lack of in-depth investigation on the linguistic issue of deaf education, with this design, the researcher aimed to fill this gap. A combination of data collection methods that fall under qualitative design were used to explore the problems in the school practices. Creswell (2009: 164) states that a combination of methods can help gather multiple forms of data, triangulate them, and interpret them objectively. Accordingly, interviews and focused group discussions (FGD) are used to collect data from the participants (i.e., policymakers, experts, school principals, teachers, students, and parents of the deaf). The instruments (i.e., semi-structured interviews, FGD guides, and observation checklists) were prepared based on the research objectives and the literature reviews. Additional data were obtained from classroom and school observations, as well as document analysis.

Six pre-primary (KG) and primary schools, namely, Minillk II, Hamele 19, Alpha, Victory, Mekanissa schools, and Co-Action KG, found in Addis Ababa, were selected as sites based on convenience sampling. With the assumption that the problems in different school types and contexts may differ, the schools are sampled from special schools for the deaf, mainstream schools with inclusive classes, and special units. Both government-owned and NGO-owned schools are also included. With regard to grade levels, pre-primary (KG) and primary classes (grades 1-4) are in focus. These grades are

selected because they are critical levels for deaf children's first SL (i.e., their MT) acquisition, as most deaf children came to school without or little language input from home, unlike their hearing counterparts (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016: 595; Eyasu, 2016: 308).

Six school principals, 17 teachers, and six personnel from the FDRE Ministry of Education (MOE), the Addis Ababa Education Bureau, the FDRE Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the FDRE Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs were interviewed. Information was obtained from 10 parents of deaf children through individual interviews and FGD. Five FGDs (a group containing 8–10 deaf people) were conducted with deaf leaders from different branches of ENAD. To gather firsthand information on how EthSL is used in and out of classrooms, observations with an expert eye were carried out for 15 days.

The data recorded in audio and video recorders, as well as notebooks, were transcribed, translated, and categorized thematically into the predefined themes that emanated from the research question. The interpreted data from the different sources were then compiled together and reported in narration.

Ethical considerations were carefully managed, encompassing the acquisition of informed consent from all participants and the protection of individual source confidentiality.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. The Schools' Context

From the six kindergartens (KG) and elementary schools selected for the research, Menelik II and *Hamele* 19 KG and Elementary Schools are mainstream schools that primarily enroll hearing students and accommodate deaf students in special units (classes) until grade four and integrate them in 'inclusive classes' starting from KG, respectively. Both are known as inclusive schools, despite their different arrangements.

Alpha, Victory, and Co-action KG are special schools that admit deaf students primarily. They are known as special schools for the deaf. Mekanissa is the other special school for the deaf, which admits primarily deaf students and allows siblings to join the school. The school administration claims it is an inclusive school; however, the data from observation shows that it is implementing inverted integration (i.e., hearing students are integrated while deaf students are dominant in number). In the special schools for the deaf, more exposure to SL communication in and out of classes was observed.

Amharic (i.e., oral language) is the dominant language in mainstream schools, in contrast. In other words, the children can get more space to develop their SL in the special schools than in the mainstream ones.

In terms of ownership, Minillk II, *Hamele* 19, and Alpha Schools are government-owned (public schools). Victory and Mekanissa schools are religious NGO-owned. Co-Action Kindergarten (KG), which is the only exclusive KG for the deaf, is run by the Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf (ENAD). Since ownership influences practices, those schools owned by NGOs were observed to pay relatively better attention to the linguistic needs of deaf students by securing a SL-dominated school environment, which is key to language acquisition and learning. On the other hand, all schools run by the government are obliged to follow IE, which integrates the deaf students into the hearings' classes, except Alpha School, which limits their exposure to SL.

Most of the classrooms in each school were inadequately arranged for deaf students. Since SL is a visual-gestural language, it requires a seating arrangement where interlocutors face one another in SL medium classes. However, most of the classrooms observed had rows of desks where students, including the deaf, were seated front and back, regardless of the class size. Alpha and Co-action Schools, for instance, employ common row seat arrangements, though the average number of students in a class is less than ten. The only classes observed with half-circle seating arrangements in a way that allowed students to see each other's and the teachers' signing were KG classes at Victory School for the Deaf and grade three special class at Menelik Primary School. These factors can have an impact on the effectiveness of educational communication in the classroom.

5.2. Language of Education in the Schools: The *de facto* Policy

There is no *de jure* (covert) language policy found at the school level that determines the medium of instruction (MOI) and language subject (L1) for deaf students, in contrast with spoken MT students. On the other hand, the data from the schools' practices (the *de facto* policy) illustrates that 'signing' is generally accepted as a medium of instruction with deaf students. All teachers and school principals interviewed affirmed that SL is an irreplaceable and most appropriate medium. Literature also confirms that SL is the most appropriate medium of education for deaf children (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016).

In response to the question, which specific SL do they use, and how is it selected? It was learned that there were teachers who did not know the proper

name of the SL they were using. Almost half of the teachers and the majority of the school principals were unaware of the existence of different SLs or the difference between EthSL and other signings in use. Tangibly, only five deaf teachers responded that they use EthSL, mentioned its proper name, and differentiated it from other signings. This indicates that most educators have dilemmas about the differences between various signing systems, which may affect which one they can choose and how they can use it. Misconceptions like this are quite common and negatively affect the status of SLs (Johnston and Schembri, 2007).

Signed Amharic was a dominantly used sign system in schools. In about two-thirds of the classes observed, this artificial language was employed as the medium where the teachers spoke (i.e., mostly Amharic) and simultaneously used signs of EthSL following the Amharic sentence structure. Though manual representations of spoken languages, like Signed Amharic, are not the natural and primary language of the deaf (Reagan, 2010), there were teachers who argued that Signed Amharic is better as it can help the deaf learn both languages (i.e., EthSL and Amharic) concurrently. There is no empirical evidence for this claim, though.

According to the FDRE education policy, the child's MT is also supposed to be given as L1, besides MOI (MOE, 1994; MOE, 2018; and MOE, 2020). Amharic or Afan Oromo are the L1 given in the schools observed. SL is taught as an additional and optional subject besides Amharic and English (as L2) without officially allotted time from the mandated office (i.e., Addis Ababa City Administration Education Bureau). For languages (L1) recognized as subjects in primary grades, the General Education Curriculum Framework (MOE, 2020) allows five periods per week. For EthSL, however, there is no officially allotted time. The NGO-owned schools under study made decisions at the school level and assigned 3-5 weekly periods for them (namely, Mekanissa, Co-action, and Victory schools). The government-owned schools, in contrast, only teach SL for deaf students in place of other subjects (like music and physical education, as in Menelik and Alpha schools), during unoccupied periods, or in the spare time of the students (as in Hamele 19 School). In other words, the students are learning their MT and primary language at the expense of other school subjects or their extra time, unlike their peers. These practices indicate that EthSL didn’t get equal recognition like other MTs, if it is considered a language at all. These may affect not only the LHRs for MT education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016) but also the equitable right of deaf children to access quality education.

Generally, employing EthSL as MT for the deaf did not have *de jure* support in the schools. However, literature indicates SL needs overt policy support for its effective use in different domains to overcome the misconceptions and marginalization the community has been facing throughout history (Reagan, 2010: 49–54). Though employing SL in deaf children's education is permitted in schools, a lack of clear policy and guidelines on how, where, and which SL to use makes the practice full of dilemmas. On top of that, not assigning a period for EthSL as a subject implies that it is not fully accepted officially as the MT and language of deaf citizens.

5.3. Curriculum for Ethiopian Sign Language

The FDRE General Education Curriculum Framework also indicated (MOE, 2020: 29–32; 2018: 20; and MOE, 1994) the need to prepare MT curriculum and related provisions by respective bodies following the national frameworks. Accordingly, in the last 30 years, curricula for more than 53 MT languages have been prepared by those mandated bodies, employed as MOIs, and given as subjects (L1) (MOE, 2020: 29). The documents also show the right to MT education is a territorial right that would be enforced within the determined area of living in Ethiopia. In the case of deaf people, who are not identified within any particular province but live in dispersed areas all over Ethiopia, which province or provinces are mandated to prepare the EthSL MT education curriculum is unclear. EthSL is a non-territorial language (ENAD, 2017; Eyasu, 2015). Consequently, unlike other minority languages, its use as a language of education and MT requires a national direction as it is a cross-regional language. The Addis Ababa City Administration Education Bureau, from which all the schools under study were supposed to get direction, did not recognize EthSL as the MT of deaf children in the city. Therefore, there is no curriculum prepared to teach it as MT or L1, unlike Amharic and Afaan Oromo. The SNE expert at the Bureau confirmed they did not have such a curriculum.

As UNCRPD (2006) and WFD (2018) clearly indicate, SL is the most appropriate and accessible medium of education for deaf children. The schools under study tried to employ signing as a medium of instruction for deaf students. However, there was no modification or adaptation made to the curriculum of different subjects, neither in the SNE framework, which encourages curriculum adaptation based on the student's ability and need, nor in the MT education frameworks, which require it to be translated into the MT of the students to facilitate their understanding of the contents. A similar

curriculum that is prepared for Amharic MT students, who have different linguistic, social, and cognitive circumstances, is used for the deaf as well.

This could be a reflection of the common misconception that the deaf are members of the surrounding speech community (Johnston and Schembri, 2007) or denying their distinctive linguistic identity. As a result, there were even contents designed to be delivered that are not comprehendible with deaf learners' physical conditions, like listening and speaking lessons. Teachers were observed as being challenged to deliver such content, and some escaped while others just replaced it with signing. All the curriculum adaptation decisions (if any) depend on the classroom teacher, as observed.

There is no official curriculum in the schools to teach EthSL like other MT/L1 subjects in Ethiopia (MOE, 2020: 29–32), though all the schools have made attempts to deliver it in practice. To fill the gap, each school and teacher selected the contents, strategies of learning, and assessment methods they thought appropriate for themselves. Consequently, a lack of consistency with the contents, approaches, and students' learning goals among schools and classes was observed. In experienced and specialized schools (e.g., Mekanissa School for the Deaf), the contents are customarily known by the teachers, though they do not have a written curriculum. On the other hand, in mainstream schools like Hamle 19 School, EthSL teaching is carried out erratically. As the interviewed teachers explained, their own lesson plans are their guides, while the plans were mostly unwritten and prepared based on the available dictionaries. Since all the teachers did not have specialized training in teaching EthSL as L1, they taught based on their common understandings. The majority of lessons focused on fingerspelling and vocabulary teaching throughout the classes observed from KG to grade four. Lack of appropriate curriculum and other language teaching materials, like textbooks, was observed to make EthSL teaching as L1 amorphous. While schools are a key domain for learning EthSL (Eyasu, 2016), they are not playing this role properly. This could affect not only their linguistic skill development but also their overall cognitive development, as the literature indicates (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016). The right to learn their MT is accordingly violated because the linguistic identity of the deaf doesn't get similar attention (Reagan, Matlinsc, and Pielickc, 2021) in the curriculum.

5.4. Textbooks and other Reference Materials for EthSL

Textbooks are the other key teaching and learning material for any subject. According to the FDRE MOE Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2020/21

(MOE, 2021: 42) report, there were 348 SL textbooks available for students in primary schools in Addis Ababa City Administration in the stated academic year. However, no EthSL textbooks were found in the six schools observed except for a few dictionaries. As the report contradicted the observation data, key personnel from the Federal MOE to the schools' levels were consulted on this issue.

The data found from the FDRE MOE indicated that EthSL textbooks were prepared for all grades—from preschool to grade 12—in 2018 with donor funding. However, as the mandate to print and distribute textbooks to schools is the regional states' and city administrations' education bureaus, the FDRE MOE couldn't do anything except provide the texts in softcopies. As the SNE Director at the Ministry explained, the problem mainly came from misconceptions about the language. The lack of considering EthSL as an independent language and subject, as well as assuming the texts are prepared for Amharic Sign language, are the reasons behind not using the texts, as the director mentioned. However, the texts were prepared for EthSL, not Amharic, which is the national sign language of the deaf community in Ethiopia, independent of the spoken languages in their surroundings (ENAD, 2008; 2017; Eyasu, 2015). The FGD with deaf community leaders from different regions also confirmed that similar misconceptions about the language are quite common. They also mention the imposition of hearing educators who did not understand the nature of the language, which was observed to be influencing and affecting the proper use of the natural EthSL and its material developments, including textbooks.

Besides the misconceptions, it was learned from the interview with SNE experts in the Addis Ababa City Administration Education Bureau, who are key personnel for its implementation in the schools, which they did not have information about the textbooks prepared by the MOE. All the teachers and school principals interviewed similarly explained they didn't see the textbooks mentioned and never used them. This implies there is broken communication between the Federal and City Administrations with regard to deaf education, which is affecting the right to access quality education.

All the schools examined use dictionaries as textbooks, and most of them are accepted as appropriate and adequate texts for teaching EthSL, as revealed in the detailed questioning. The responses made it clear that there is confusion regarding the difference between dictionaries and textbooks. Dictionaries can be a reference or supplementary teaching material for language teaching and help to standardize a language. However, as their purpose, design, and

presentation are different from school textbooks, they are hardly texts, particularly at the primary school level. The data presented in the Annual Abstract 2020/21 (2021) could also be associated with this confusion of reporting dictionary as text since teachers and principals interviewed were providing similar misleading information for the researcher of this study as well. The confusion was also confirmed by direct observations in the classes.

In sum, the attempts to teach EthSL as a language/L1 subject are made without a textbook. The dictionaries, which are reference material, are wrongly assumed to be texts, though they are not adequately available in the schools. Structural problems that didn't properly locate the responsible body for EthSL teaching material preparation at the Addis Ababa City Administration levels also affect not using already prepared texts, so such vital resources are wasted. The statistical data found in government reports (MOE, 2021) regarding the EthSL textbook, which is deceiving, could also be attributed to the problem being sustained, as no solution can be given without identifying the actual problem.

5.5. Teachers' Qualification on using the EthSL as a MOI

Teachers' competence in the medium of instruction is among the key issues in education. Accordingly, it gets ample attention in teachers' training. FDRE Education and Training Policy (1994: Article 3.4.5), in line with this, states, "Teachers starting from kindergarten to higher education will be required to have the necessary teaching qualification and competency in the medium of instruction, through pre-service and in-service training." It is also (Ibid. Article 3.5.3) obliged to make the MT of the children the medium in the teacher's training for KG and primary education. Based on these provisions in the training of teachers of deaf children, the medium is expected to be EthSL. However, the key guiding documents, including the FDRE Education and Training Policy (1994), did not clearly articulate the competence required in EthSL to teach deaf children in particular.

The SNE Strategy (MOE, 2012), on the other hand, prescribes Special Needs Education training to be a teacher for the deaf, where EthSL is not a medium of training and the required competence in the language is not defined. The whole essence of the statements about SL in the strategy implied that SL competence is not a requirement but appreciated, contrary to the essence of the frame in the educational language policy (MOE, 1994). The strategy (MOE, 2012) also indicated using SL interpreters as educators of the Deaf. However, interpretation is another profession with its own qualifications and tasks, and

above all, most of the children in pre-primary and primary levels (between 5 and 14 years of age) did not yet develop basic skills in EthSL to benefit from interpretation services.

Besides the gap in the policies, teachers of the deaf students in the schools under study had different educational backgrounds. Accordingly, their EthSL competence and knowledge were observed to be varied. From the 17 interviewed teachers, seven were trained in SNE, two in KG (for hearing students), four in EthSL and Deaf Culture, and the rest were graduates of other subjects (like Amharic, English, sociology, etc.). There was also a teacher without any formal training, except for her experiences as an assistant teacher in KG and being deaf. In all the training mentioned, EthSL is not the medium, except for EthSL and the Deaf Culture Program of AAU. In other words, the majority of the teachers under study were not qualified to teach in EthSL-medium classes, as their training did not match with the FDRE Education and Training Policy (MOE, 1994) requirement.

The expert at the Addis Ababa Education Bureau was asked about the language competence and other qualifications expected during teachers' employment or placement for schools with deaf students. It is learned from the expert's response that the Bureau expected the teachers to be SNE graduates and have SL skills as it is part of their training. He also indicated that they automatically assigned deaf teachers to schools with deaf students. The Bureau did not have mechanisms to verify their actual EthSL competence. Most of the teachers, however, disclosed they didn't take SL skill courses in their pre-service, and a few said they were inadequate. Getting teachers who are trained in their own MT is among the LHRs in MT education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016). Here as well, a violation of rights can be witnessed, unlike many nationalities in Ethiopia.

Except in Co-action and Victory Schools, EthSL skills were not mandatory for employment. In the case of the government schools, namely Hamele 19, Minillik, and Alpha Schools, teachers are assigned by the City Education Bureau without considering their SL skills and awareness of deafness. As some teachers at Alpha School for the Deaf disclosed, they did not have any SL skills and had never met a deaf person in their lives when they joined the school. As a result, they were confused and frustrated at the beginning, as well as unable to teach properly until they learned the SL over time. Teachers without any signing skills have also been observed at *Hamele* 19 School, though they have deaf students. This means deaf students are practically excluded from the teaching-learning process because of a lack of appropriate

mediums. This is against the principle of IE, which obliges students to teach according to their linguistic and cultural needs (MOE, 1994 and 2012; WFD, 2018). This is also against the LHR principle of getting education through accessible language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016).

The principals of all the schools stated they provided in-service SL training in different ways for their teachers. The interviewed teachers, on the other hand, indicate that it is inadequate and inconsistent. Such mismatches between the reality on the ground and reports from officers were observed to be the common gap in the area, which might be preventing the right solution.

5.6. Mother Tongue Verses Inclusive Education for Deaf Children

The document analyses indicate that the issue of deaf education is covered mainly under inclusive education (IE)-related policies. According to the SNE/IE Strategy (MOE, 2012) and the Master Plan for Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education in Ethiopia (2016-2025), IE is the guiding philosophy of education for students with disabilities, including the deaf. With this framework, making education inclusive and accessible through SL and other means of communication is promoted. However, EthSL in particular is not determined to be the same medium of instruction as MT, or the primary language of the deaf. The FDRE Education Policy (MOE, 1994), Language Policy (2020), and other official documents that give direction on MT education, on the other hand, are silent about the MT of deaf children. In all policies, the pathological paradigm, which does not recognize the linguistic and cultural identity of the deaf, dominates the linguistic community (Reagan, 2010). As a result, the linguistic issue did not get the attention it required.

Because the policies obliged, most of the schools under study attempted to implement IE through different approaches. In Hamele 19 Primary School, the deaf students integrated into mainstream classes where Amharic was the main medium of instruction and most teachers could not sign. Hence, physical inclusion is secured, but they are excluded from the actual teaching-learning because of a lack of appropriate language determination and use. In the special schools (namely, Alpha, Mekanissa, Victory, and Co-action), on the other hand, signing served as the medium of education and communication, though not considered and offered as MT. The schools exclude EthSL as MT, partly because the policies don't direct in that way. The evidence from Education Bureau activities also confirms that EthSL is not counted as MT or a fully-fledged language. Lack of curriculum, textbooks, trained teachers, and clear guidelines are among the evidence for this argument. In the case of other

spoken minority languages in Ethiopia that are determined to be MT, they were provided with most of the above-mentioned inputs (USAID 2021; Heugh et al., 2007). The fact that schools are critical places for deaf children's SL acquisition and their cognitive development (Reagan, 2010) seems to be ignored. On top of that, concrete language skills are the basis for effective educational communication. So that it is unrealistic to have IE without properly addressing the linguistic needs of deaf children (Lane, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 2005). In line with this research, the effectiveness of inclusion with younger deaf students is limited, particularly in oral-dominated classes (Cawthon, 2001: 212).

WFD (2018) stated its concern regarding how IE is implemented in many places, as it is not truly inclusive for deaf learners and does not meet deaf learners' needs. Similarly, leaders of the deaf community in Ethiopia raised their discontent with current practices. During the FGD, the community's leaders argued that IE didn't create the best learning environment for deaf children, particularly in the primary grades. As one of the leaders at ENAD stated, IE as an approach might be good. But it is not effective in current practices as it is not provided with the necessary inputs, like proficient signing teachers. So, the community believes that deaf students are not benefiting from IE practiced in schools. The evidence showed that the approach is not getting support from some parts of the deaf community, who are suffering the consequences. The Education Bureau experts interviewed, in contrast, reflect their strong belief in the effectiveness of IE, particularly in the way it is implemented in mainstream inclusive schools like Hamele 19. They also stated that the community's discontent comes from not understanding the approach properly. However, in principle, for an educational approach to be effective, getting the community's acceptance is inescapable. Participating in educational decision-making, including the selection of the language of education, is among the basic educational rights of a community. It is also one of the LHRs to choose the medium of instruction in formal education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2007).

In addition to the community, some experienced teachers for the deaf and experts contend that IE did not make quality education accessible for the deaf in Ethiopia in the way it is practiced currently. One of the senior teachers at Menilik II School states that it is rather leading them to more exclusion as it labels them in mainstream classes as low achievers while they are not provided with the necessary support.

The data from the policies and practices in the schools generally indicated the right of deaf children to learn EthSL as MT in pre- and primary education is not protected in both the IE and MT education frameworks. Consequently, the students are not learning EthSL as their MT or first language and properly using it as a medium in education. The inclusion of the deaf without addressing their linguistic needs properly, besides, let the deaf be excluded from real access to education and its benefits while access to schools improved. The dominance of disability discourse in the area also prevents the linguistic identity and language of the deaf from being promoted and protected in educational settings.

5.7. Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) of the Deaf and MT Education

Accesses to MT, MT education, and the right to language-related identities, including the right to be identified positively with the language of preference and maintaining and fully developing it, are LHRs anyone can hold as a human being (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016; Krausneker, 2008: 9). International legislation accordingly promotes the protection of these rights in education and other domains for deaf persons as well (CRPD, 2006: Article 24).

In Ethiopia, though UN CRPD (2006) was ratified as part of the law of the land, none of the national legislation and policies identified deaf persons with their distinctive linguistic identity as EthSL users. The disability identity, as persons with hearing impairment, is the only identity recognized, including in the language-related policies (MoCT, 2020). Consequently, against the LHR principles, the deaf couldn't get clear legal and policy promotion and protection for their EthSL-related identity. Of course, EthSL use is not prohibited in schools. However, the toleration policy and the permission given to use it as a communication tool (not as a language) couldn't promote the identity embedded in the language, while it is the core identity that makes the deaf different not only from the surrounding spoken language community but also from other people with disabilities. Like any other linguistic community, to carry out thorough language planning, recognizing the deaf as a linguistic community whose primary language is EthSL is fundamental.

With the current disability orientation, the focus is mainly on granting accessibility through equipment provision. As most of the schoolteachers and experts indicated, they believe material requirements like dictionaries are enough to secure access. The importance of full access to the natural EthSL, with all the necessary procedures and materials for language teaching, didn't seem well noticed. Consequently, the deaf are facing double discrimination in

the disability circle as well, as their language differs from that of other people with disabilities. Their collective LHRs to exist as distinctive groups, enjoy, maintain, and develop their language and related identities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016; Krausneker, 2008: 10) did not get legitimate support in the schools.

On top of not recognizing the distinctive linguistic identity at individual and collective levels, the policies examined and the school practices were found to be assimilationist against the LHRs of the deaf children. Starting from the identification, which disregarded their distinctive linguistic identity, the existing practices of IE promoted assimilation to the Amharic speaking community and identity, though not directly. The avoidance of declaring EthSL as a primary language, or MT, and the insignificant attention given to teaching EthSL as a MT/first language with proper curriculum illustrated a denial of the legitimacy of EthSL as an important part of their identity.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

MT education is one of the core rights in education and is widely promoted in Ethiopia. In the case of deaf children whose MT is EthSL, however, this right is left unprotected in the school policies and practices. Therefore, artificial signing, like signed Amharic, dominated as a medium of instruction, though it is not a natural language. EthSL, the natural language of the deaf, on the other hand, is not acknowledged as a full-fledged language. This is attested to by the absence of clear guidance, curriculum in the schools to teach EthSL as the first language, or MT, the absence of officially allotted time, appropriately trained teachers, materials like textbooks, and other official actions.

The dominance of Pathological paradigm also observed to influence the access of deaf students to quality education, as it did not recognize the distinct linguistic identity and needs of the deaf. Alternative perspectives, like the sociolinguistic paradigm, did not get attention, both in the policies and school practices. Subsequently, the issue of deaf education was left only for SNE experts, who could not handle the linguistic issue.

The attempts to employ IE with deaf students without the required attention for their linguistic needs, besides, complicated the protection of their LHRs from MT and related rights in education. In a way, the EthSL employed in deaf education currently hardly protects both linguistic rights (including MT education) and educational rights since there is no education that can be successful without a proper medium of instruction (language).

To protect the deaf children's LHRs from MT education for better educational access and other cognitive benefits, this study primarily recommends revisiting the existing policies. Overt policies that clearly recognize EthSL as the MT or first language of the deaf children and the language of education required. Besides, directions on how EthSL should be used—where, when, why, and by whom—should get proper direction based on linguistic studies and thorough language planning activities. Such detailed policies are essential, not only to direct the practices but also to address the overdue misconceptions and dilemmas in the area. Revisiting the paradigm that framed the current educational policies and practices is also essential. Providing the necessary inputs for effective use of EthSL as MT, like curriculum preparation and teacher training, are among the activities that require official intervention from the federal and city education bureaus.

In sum, protecting and promoting the right of deaf children to access EthSL as MT in education is important for three major reasons. One, most of them learn SL at school for the first time, so it is a domain of their primary language acquisition, unlike other students. Two, lack of attention for the language may lead to delays in cognitive and social development, as research indicates (Trovato, 2013: 411). And third, as the overall effect could decline their quality of life against their human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2016). Therefore, the issue needs more attention than any other minority.

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