



Ethiopia

**The impact of language policy
and practice on children's learning:**
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa
2016

2.6. Ethiopia

2.6.1. Background information

Apart from a brief period of occupation, when Italy occupied Ethiopia from 1936 until Ethiopia's sovereignty was recognized in 1941, Ethiopia did not experience the same colonial history as the rest of the region. This enabled Ethiopia to take a different approach to its language policy from other countries in Africa. Ambatchew (2010, pp. 199-200) explains the historical context of Ethiopia's language-in-education policy, noting that the traditional system of education in the nineteenth century was in the Ge'ez and Amharic languages. From 1908, however, modern schools began teaching French and Arabic.

Ambatchew notes that "during the Italian colonial occupation (1936-1941), vernaculars were used as media of instruction with the aim of disuniting the country". Following the Italian occupation, he notes "the need to reunify the country led Emperor Haile-Selassie to change the medium of instruction to Amharic in government schools in the 1940s." The socialist government of 1974-1991 encouraged the use of some local languages for literacy, but not so much as languages of instruction in formal education.

Ethnologue lists 89 languages for Ethiopia.

2.6.2. Current language policy

The path chosen by Ethiopia's current government with regard to language policy was, and remains, progressive. According to the Constitution of 1994, Amharic is the official language of the country, however, the Constitution also directs that "all Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition, and that each member state of the Federation shall determine its own respective official language or languages" (Nekatibeb, 2007, p. 51).

Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy further states that primary education is to be given in nationality languages (FDRE, 1994, p. 23). According to Alemu and Abebayehu (2011, p. 403), the underlying assumption of the policy is that the nationality language is the mother tongue of all children who live in the area where that language is spoken.

Ambatchew notes that "[t]he [1991] government allowed instruction in different languages before even adopting the official language policy in 1994, which allows for every language in the country to become a medium of instruction" (Ambatchew, 2010, p. 200). Bogale (2009)¹⁶ comments that "this policy means that Ethiopian language education policy falls broadly within the parameters of 'best policy' in terms of multilingual developing countries." He notes however that "as is the case in many other countries, implementation is not always aligned with actual policy" (Bogale, 2009, pp. 1089-1090).

2.6.3. Education policy and practice

Since 1994, Ethiopian education has been implemented under this ambitious mother tongue language policy, the goals of which are to improve literacy rates and academic achievement, as well as to enhance appreciation of local languages and cultures (Wolff, 2011, p. 97). More than 30 languages are being used as languages of instruction or taught as a subject in primary schools (Derash, 2013). Several of these languages are used in training primary teachers and three of them are taught as subjects beyond primary school (Anteneh and Ado, 2006). English is taught as a subject from Grade 1 and Amharic is taught as a subject from either Grade 3 or Grade 5, depending on the region (Heugh, Bogale, Benson and Gebre Yohannes, 2007, p. 5). This supportive mother tongue policy is widely considered by multilingual education experts to be the most progressive national policy environment in Africa.

16 <http://portal.svt.ntnu.no/sites/ices16/Proceedings/Volume%204/Berhanu%20Bogale%20-%20Language%20Determination%20in%20Ethiopia.pdf>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

Ambatchew (2010) takes issue with the glowing reputation of Ethiopia's language-in-education policy, claiming that "it is one of the most advanced language policies on paper, but with questionable practices on the ground" (p. 201). He observes that, "for all the progressive policy in the country, many of the political elite continue to send their children to English or French medium schools" (p. 204). Ambatchew claims that some families intentionally move from mother tongue areas to cities where classes are taught in Amharic (p. 206).

Addressing some of the reasons behind this mismatch between policy and implementation, Cohen (2007, p. 64) describes the current argument that, since the various languages being used for primary grades instruction are not all equal in their adequacy for use in education, the current practice is inherently unfair and perpetuates educational inequality. Cohen also describes an additional concern that this policy may be ethnically divisive and create regional nationalisms.

2.6.4. Studies

A study by development economist Rajesh Ramachandran (2012) assessed the effect of the 1994 language policy change on educational outcomes. The study examined data from the Demographic and Health Survey from 2011, a nationally representative sample from the nine regions and two city administrative areas of Ethiopia. The analysis of this data shows that mother tongue instruction has had a positive effect at all levels of schooling, leading to a 12 per cent increase in the number of students completing six years or more of schooling.

Heugh et al (2007) carried out an extensive study of language-in-education policy and practice in Ethiopia, commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The study concludes that "the MoE policy of eight years of mother tongue-medium schooling is one of the best on the continent and promotes sound educational practice" (p.7).

The authors also note that a great deal of public pressure is being put on regional education bureaux to use English as the medium of instruction in primary schooling; this is a challenge because "teachers throughout the system have extremely limited competence in the English language, and extremely limited exposure to English outside the classroom" (p. 6). The authors recommend that this heavy emphasis on English be moderated to allow greater resourcing for other languages.

In 2010, USAID's *EQUIP2* project published a working paper on the relationship between early grade reading and school effectiveness in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nepal (USAID, 2010). At that time, Ethiopia was noted for providing language textbooks for Grades 1 to 3 more widely than other countries, although students were observed using these books a very small percentage of the time. The paper noted that "very few students read more than 40 [words per minute] and the largest percentage (36 percent) could not read at all."

Teshome (2007) reports on a quantitative study of the relationship between learning through the mother tongue and academic achievement in the Grade 8 subjects of biology, physics, chemistry, mathematics and English. The scores of students who studied in their mother tongue were up to 11 per cent higher than the scores of those who studied these subjects in a language that was not their mother tongue.

2.6.5. Language education initiatives

Reading for Ethiopia's Achievement Developed (READ)

Beginning in 2012, a project called Reading for Ethiopia's Achievement Developed (READ) was begun by USAID and the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, with technical assistance from partners including RTI, SIL/SIL LEAD, Save the Children and Florida State University. The project was based on an early grade

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reading assessment (EGRA) in 2010, which indicated that 40 per cent of the Grades 2 and 3 children tested were unable to read at all (Derash, 2013). The goal of this large, five-year programme is to improve the reading and writing skills of 15 million children from Grades 1 to 8, in seven of the most widely spoken languages in Ethiopia.

Following two years of curriculum revision and materials development, the programme was officially launched in October 2014. The USAID press release noted that “this year’s introduction of the new curriculum and reading materials [for] Grades 1 to 4, complemented by teacher training, resulted from a massive two-year effort involving federal and regional officials, educators, linguists, and illustrators, teacher training colleges and pilot schools. A similar effort is now underway for Grades 5-8.”¹⁷

SIL Ethiopia

Since 2008, SIL Ethiopia has been carrying out a language development and multilingual education project in six languages of the Bench-Maji Zone of southwest Ethiopia (Baale, Bench, Diizin, Me’en, Sheko, and Suri) in collaboration with the zonal government. The project is developing the six languages in the Zone for use in primary school.

In the Benishangul Gumuz region, SIL is assisting the regional government to develop multilingual education in three languages: Shinasha, Gumuz and Bertha. This collaborative project began in 2007 with linguistic research and orthography development. SIL also develops materials

for mother tongue as a subject and all other subjects, as well as training teachers. Currently, there are 20 pilot schools in which children of the area learn in their own languages (Derash, 2013).

Literacy Boost

Save the Children implemented Literacy Boost projects¹⁸ in both the Dendi woreda (district) and the Tigray region of Ethiopia, the former in 2010-2012 and the latter in 2011-2014. The *Literacy Boost* programme included teacher training, community reading activities, and age-appropriate local language materials (Gebreanenia, Sorissa, Takele, Yenew and Guajardo, 2014). An end line evaluation of children’s reading ability in the Tigray project was carried out entirely in Tigrigna, the pupils’ mother tongue (Gebreanenia et al, 2014). An additional implementation of Literacy Boost is being carried out in the Oromia region, as part of a three-year partnership between World Vision and Save the Children.¹⁹

The MLE Network of Ethiopia

This network was launched in 2012; its founding members include the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Addis Ababa University, Wollayetta Sodo University, the Ethiopian Multilingual and Multicultural Professionals Association, Mizan Teppi University, USAID Ethiopia, the Southern Regional Education Bureau, the Southern Bureau of Culture and Tourism, and SIL Ethiopia. The network is intended to be open to any organization working on education in the country (Trudell, 2014, p. 9).

17 <http://www.usaid.gov/ethiopia/press-releases/usaid-and-ministry-education-launch-national-mother-tongue>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

18 http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGlpI4E/b.7084483/k.8F5A/Literacy_Boost.htm. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

19 <http://www.wvi.org/literacy-boost>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.