4.1. Ethiopia

4.1.1. Background and current status

The impact of shifting national politics on language policy is particularly strong in Ethiopia. The languages used in education over the past 200 years have included Ge‘ez, Amharic, French, English and Arabic (Ambatchew 2010). Ambatchew also notes that during the Italian colonial occupation from 1936 to 1941, local language policy was used to fragment the country. When Emperor Haile-Selassie came to power in the 1940s, he determined to use Amharic to unite it. Hence, the medium of instruction in government schools became Amharic. The socialist government that came to power thirty years later, in 1974, continued the Amharic dominant policy, though it did acknowledge the language rights of other ethnic groups.

With the coming to power of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1991, language policy became one of the symbols of the overturning of ethnic Amharic rule. The new Constitution stated that every “nationality” or ethnic group had the right to use its own language in primary school. Alemu and Abebayehu note that:

“Ethiopia’s 1994 Education and Training Policy states that ‘primary education be given in nationality languages’ (FDRE, 1994, p. 23). The underlying assumption of the policy (as stated in the policy document) is that the nationality language is the ‘mother-tongue’ of all children that live in the area where the specific nationality language is spoken.” (Alemu and Abebayehu, 2011, p. 403)

Since that time, primary education has followed this mother tongue language policy that aims to improve literacy rates and academic achievement, and also to enhance appreciation of local languages and cultures (Wolff, 2011, p. 97). The nine regional governments (which are themselves based on ethnic territory) determine when the transition from local language medium to English will take place, whether in Grade 5, Grade 7 or Grade 9 (Bogale, 2009, pp. 108-9). The regional governments also decide in which grade Amharic will be introduced as a subject: either Grade 3 or Grade 5 (Heugh, Bogale, Benson and Gebre Yohannes, 2007, p. 5). Ambatchew (2010, p. 201) contends that following the 2005 elections, “some regional states changed the medium of instruction from local languages to English at the second cycle of primary education.”

More than 30 Ethiopian languages are currently in use as languages of instruction or taught as a subject in primary schools (Zeme, 2013). Several languages are used in training primary teachers, and three are taught as subjects beyond primary school (Anteneh and Ado, 2006). This strongly supportive mother tongue policy is widely considered by multilingual education experts to be the most progressive national policy environment in Africa. An extensive study by Heugh et al (2007) concludes that the Ministry of Education policy of eight years of mother tongue medium schooling promotes sound educational practice and is one of the best on the continent:

“The decentralised system favors adoption of appropriate models and practices, and there are significant human and linguistic resources in the regions that can be built upon to support mother tongue as MOI throughout primary schooling and teacher training” (Heugh et al, 2007, p. 7).

As is often the case, however, policy implementation has proven to be more difficult to carry out than to formulate. Cohen (2007, p. 64) notes that not all the languages being used for primary grade instruction are successful in the classroom. Ambatchew observes that many of the political elite continue to send their children to English or French medium schools (2010, p. 204). And, of course, the politics underlying language choice remain, with attitudes in favour of or opposed to local language medium instruction often following more ethnic-political agendas than principles of good pedagogy (Cohen, 2007).

When it comes to education quality, current indicators certainly give reason for the government to be concerned. The 2014 Human Development Index lists Ethiopia’s primary school dropout rate at 63.4% (UNDP, 2014; see chapter 3 above). In addition, early grade reading assessments carried out in 2010 in 6 languages of Ethiopia indicate that an average of 32% of children at the end of grade 2 were unable to read one word (Table 3.4).
A working paper published in 2010, under USAID’s EQUIP2 project, examined the relationship between early grade reading and school effectiveness in Ethiopia and three other countries (USAID 2010). Ethiopia was noted for providing language arts textbooks for Grades 1 to 3 more widely than other countries did; however, students were observed using these books a very small percentage of the time. The books that were available lacked reading passages and stories, making it difficult for students to use them to learn to read. In addition, it was found that the instructional time available was not well used, with a loss of up to 30 to 40 days per year of class time.

Meeting these challenges to quality education will require improvement of systems and infrastructures such as textbook provision, teacher capacity building and others. This can and should be done without sacrificing the current commitment to mother tongue teaching and learning.

4.1.2. Evidence linking language to learning outcomes

Finding evidence that clearly links language choice to learning outcomes can be difficult, since so many other factors come into play. Research in contexts where the variables tested are limited to language choice indicates that, all other things being equal, children should learn in a language they speak. This kind of research is not common in the Ethiopian context, but a few studies do address the issue.

Mother tongue medium learning in Grade 8

One such study, reported by Teshome (2007), looks at the relationship between mother tongue medium learning and academic achievement in the Grade 8 subjects of biology, physics, chemistry, mathematics and English. The findings indicate that the test scores of students who studied these subjects in their mother tongue were up to 11 per cent higher than the scores of those who studied in a language that was not their mother tongue. Teshome’s study confirms the pedagogical effectiveness of learning in the mother tongue in Ethiopia; it suggests that the policy of providing primary education in the mother tongue is appropriate and that it should be maintained. The study’s confirmation that learning in the mother tongue is one of the most decisive factors in student achievement indicates the need for concerted effort to fully implement the language policy.

The impact of language policy change

A study by development economist Rajesh Ramachandran (2012) assessed the effect of the 1994 language policy support for mother tongue learning throughout the country. The study examined data from the 2011 Demographic and Health Survey, a nationally representative sample from the nine regions and two city administrative areas of Ethiopia. The data analysis shows that mother tongue-based instruction has had a positive effect at all levels of schooling, and has increased the percentage of the sample completing six years or more of schooling, by 12 per cent.

The effectiveness of English medium teaching

A study by Heugh et al (2007) was requested by the Government of Ethiopia to examine the current language education models being used, and to make evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice. In assessing pupils’ readiness to learn in English, the researchers asked 152 educators in eight regions a series of questions about the issue.

The results described in Table 4.1 below indicate that classroom teachers fully recognize the limitations of English as a medium of instruction. More than half the teachers believe that content areas cannot be successfully taught in English until Grades 7-10. Asked about the grade level in which full competence in English is reached, the largest percentage responded with Grades 11-12 or higher. The data underscore the importance of transitioning from the mother tongue medium instruction to English medium instruction as late as possible in the curriculum.

The language policy of Ethiopia provides a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of late-exit multilingual education (in which the mother tongue is used as medium of instruction for at least the first 6 to 8 years of school), as Teshome and Heugh et al did. Ethiopia is the
only country in Africa to offer the option of up to eight years of mother tongue-medium instruction; the evidence generated in these two studies supports that policy option, since they show that even by Grade 8 the most effective language for learning is the mother tongue rather than English.

**Future results from the Reading for Ethiopia’s Achievement Developed - Technical Assistance (READ-TA) project**

Another promising source of data on language and learning outcomes is the Reading for Ethiopia’s Achievement Developed (READ) project, which began in 2012 by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, with technical assistance from partners including RTI, SIL/SIL LEAD, Save the Children and Florida State University. The goal of this five-year programme is to improve the reading and writing skills of 15 million children in Grades 1-8, 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. Data on learning outcomes in Ethiopian languages is due to be published in 2016.

**Literacy Boost findings**

Save the Children’s Literacy Boost programme is a three-year programme of teacher training, community reading activities, and age-appropriate local-language materials to support emergent literacy skills among early grade children. Baseline and end-line reading assessments, as well as assessment of home literacy environments, allow an understanding of the impact of this model. Importantly, the reading assessment is carried out in the language of the region, which is also the language of instruction. Assessment in the language spoken by the children, rather than in a foreign language, allows a more accurate assessment of their reading ability.

A Literacy Boost programme was carried out in the Oromia Region from 2010-2012. A mid-term evaluation of the programme indicated that student absenteeism decreased significantly in the Literacy Boost schools. Reading skills of the students also increased significantly over those of children in comparison schools. The Oromo language was the language of the programme and the assessment.

**Table 4.1. Educator responses to questions about the grade at which English-medium instruction should commence in relation to different subjects (from Heugh et al, 2007, pp. 84-5)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Grade 1-4</th>
<th>Grade 5-6</th>
<th>Grade 7-8</th>
<th>Grade 9-10</th>
<th>Grade 11-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When are students ready to use English as medium of instruction?</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From which level can <strong>Mathematics</strong> be taught in English without the help of explanations in an Ethiopian Language?</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From which level can <strong>Natural Sciences</strong> be taught in English without the help of explanations in an Ethiopian Language?</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From which level can <strong>Social Sciences</strong> be taught in English without the help of explanations in an Ethiopian Language?</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in this school/region are fully competent to use English medium by the time they reach which level?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Literacy Boost programme in the Tigray region from 2011 to 2014 (Gebreanenia, Sorissa, Takele, Yenew and Guajardo, 2014) was carried out in the Tigrigna language, the mother tongue of all of the students in the programme. Reading comprehension scores of the students able to read with comprehension increased from 31 per cent to 45 per cent. The findings of the final evaluation underscored the importance of local language and plenty of reading material aimed specifically at children.

4.1.3. Issues and challenges
Several issues related to language policy are noteworthy in the Ethiopian context.

- **The complexity of improving learning outcomes:** Ethiopia clearly illustrates the importance of addressing not only the language of instruction, but also the broader challenges to effective learning. Education authorities are using mother tongue-based instruction to generate broader reforms such as curriculum review, teacher capacity building and student access to learning materials, which they believe will result in the desired student learning outcomes.

- **Accommodating the large number of local languages:** Policy makers have realized that the constitutional commitment to provide education in every Ethiopian language is a huge undertaking. Still, the government shows an unwavering determination to serve as many of its language communities as possible with quality mother tongue-based education. Its readiness to partner with international NGOs and donor agencies to help realize this goal is an important policy position. Moreover, prioritizing the language communities with least access to quality education and the most enthusiasm for the use of their mother tongue in schools is most likely to gain the desired student learning outcomes in Ethiopian languages.

- **The growing influence of English:** The policy decision to prioritize English language learning in primary schools has meant that English is gaining greater influence on language practices in Ethiopia. It is important for education authorities to keep in mind that the global dominance of English has generated a number of myths about the value of English in local contexts as well as in the national language ecology. Keeping English “in its place” as one of many languages in Ethiopia will be important; allowing it to dominate education and other public spaces is likely to interfere with the development of Ethiopia’s own languages.

- **Reading materials in local languages for early readers.** As the Tigray Literacy Boost report noted, the availability of easy-reading materials in local languages plays a major role in improving student reading and learning outcomes. A number of material-development models have been generated by NGOs such as SIL Africa, Room to Read, Molteno, and others; these could help to provide the local-language supplementary reading appropriate for new learners.