

# Policy Analysis of English-Medium Instruction in Ethiopian Higher Education

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## Background

Ethiopia is a multilingual and multicultural country that has over eighty-five languages. Among the SSA states, it is the only country with its own scripts and written language that has been used in traditional schooling for thousands of years beginning from the Axumite civilization in the fourth century. It has a recorded history of indigenous education systems associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that has influenced the political and social life of the country for so long.

Although religious-based education has existed for centuries, modern education in Ethiopia is only a century old. The first modern primary school was introduced by Emperor Menelik in 1908 serving mainly as a language school in which European languages, including French, English and Italian, were taught to the few elite students at the time. Long after the introduction of modern schooling, the emperor introduced the first higher education institution, University College of Addis Ababa, in 1950. English was adopted as a medium of instruction, at the inception of the new university, by the expatriates who were mandated by the emperor to run the new institution (Murphy and Mengistu 2020). Since then, English remains the medium of instruction in all secondary and higher education institutions, whereas Amharic (the lingua franca of the country) is used as the medium of instruction across primary schools. However, with the introduction of new Education and Training Policy (ETP) in 1994, a multilingual education policy was adopted for primary education where over fifty-two local languages have been used as the medium of instruction (Ministry of Education 2015). The English-medium instruction (EMI) policy

was reaffirmed in the 1994 ETP and subsequent higher education proclamation documents released by the government in 2003, 2009, 2019 and 2020.

It is important, however, to note that the adoption of EMI policy in most low- and middle-income countries is linked with colonial legacy that favours the English language. The situation in Ethiopia is different. There are certain characteristics that make the introduction of EMI policy to higher education in Ethiopia distinct. Firstly, Ethiopia has a well-developed language with its own scripts and writing system that has been used in traditional education for centuries. Secondly, it has no colonial legacy, except for a five-year Italian occupation. Thirdly, the adoption of EMI was not a deliberate decision to benefit from globalization or for its pedagogical values. According to Woldegiorgis (2020), EMI policy was introduced in Ethiopia to escape from the centuries long traditional education system and modernize the education system through English education.

However, in the absence of past colonial influence, the adoption of EMI policy has been considered a kind of self-colonization by some Ethiopian scholars (e.g. Ramadikela et al. 2020; Woldegiorgis 2020). The association of English with modernity and the Westernization of Ethiopian education have been regarded as a violence on the indigenous epistemic system implying that both the content of the curriculum and the language of instruction disengage students. Negash (2006: 33) argues that teaching all academic subjects in English at the cost of one's native language 'is tantamount to the wholesale adaption of the culture that the English language represents'. As a result, in the academic discussions there have been increased calls for the replacement of EMI policy with Ethiopian languages.

Conversely, emphasizing the significant role of English in education, development and communication in Africa, Negash (2011) argues that no major African languages, other than English, can connect African communities with one another and with the wider world. Similarly, Yadete (2017) points out that Ethiopia cannot afford to ignore education through English without which sharing political, economic and social issues with the outside world is impossible. Scholars who are in favour of the EMI policy argue for a balanced language policy approach in which English and indigenous languages can be used as dual mediums of instruction. In summary, to educate its student population through English and for the country to benefit from globalization, policymakers need to democratize access to and improve proficiency in English language, which is central in the debate of adopting EMI policy, as briefly discussed in the next section.

## Literature review

### **The status of English in Ethiopia**

English was introduced to the Ethiopian education system by Emperor Haile Selassie during the Second World War. Since then, it has been taught as a subject and used as a medium of instruction and research publication; however, its use outside educational institutions is still limited to the elitists in the country. As a result, unlike in the streets of most SSA countries, English has no dominance over the national or local languages in the streets of cities and towns in Ethiopia. Until the 1990s, public access to English was limited to one official newspaper, *The Ethiopian Herald*, one television programme and one radio programme both limited to an hour per day to broadcast in English (Negash 2011). Despite limited access to English and the small number of proficient users, Yadete (2017) observes the eagerness of many – especially the young generation – to speak in English. Thus, English is highly regarded as a language of opportunity for higher education and employability, and it has never, unlike in some SSA contexts, been stigmatized as a colonial language in Ethiopia.

Owing to globalization, the use of English in public and private organizations has now become increasingly visible in the country. Over the past couple of decades, Ethiopia has attracted a significant number of foreign investors and tourists (Mognhodie and Woldemariam 2015), which has increased the demand for learning English and its use in public spaces. Most private companies and federal government websites as well as street signages are published in English along with the national language, Amharic. This suggests that despite the absence of historical connection to the socio-economic aspects of Ethiopian societies, English has now emerged as a relatively dominant force not only in the education system of the country but also in commerce, politics and job markets. However, the position of English has not yet been stated in the constitution of the country.

### **EMI policy and practices**

EMI can be defined as ‘an educational system where content is taught through English in contexts where English is not the primary, first, official language’ (Rose and McKinley 2018: 4). This definition seems to be relevant in the Ethiopian context as English is a second or third language for most students and teachers

in the country. That said, the spread of English as an international language has led to an exponential rise of EMI programmes in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe. The exponential growth of the EMI phenomenon has been characterized as an ‘unstoppable train’ (Macaro 2018) that has already left its station. However, research about the benefit of adopting EMI policy has not yet been conclusive.

There seems to be two schools of thought about its use as a language of instruction. On one hand, many scholars maintain the belief that English is key to increasing economic competitiveness and gaining advantages from globalization (Macaro 2018) and internationalization of higher education (Rose and McKinley 2018). Such presumed advantages of adopting EMI centre on the belief that education through the medium of English can enhance graduates’ English proficiency, individuals’ mobility and competitiveness in an international job market (Rose and Galloway 2019). On the other hand, scholars in SSA countries (e.g. Kamwangamalu 2013; Romaine 2015) argue that the use of EMI can impede the quality of education holding back development. Kamwangamalu (2013) argues that in SSA contexts most students do not acquire a level of proficiency in English to move up the social ladder, which suggests that learning academic content and educational outcomes can be obstructed by students’ lack of competence in English. Additionally, Romaine (2015: 263) states that adopting English as the sole medium of instruction ‘will not guarantee the supposed benefits of participation in the global economy for the majority of African students.’ In support of Romaine’s views, Ferguson (2013) highlights that EMI policy generally favours students from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds as they are more likely to have access to quality education through English that prepares them for better employment opportunities.

A significant body of literature indicates that knowledge of and proficiency in English in EMI settings is a requirement for academic success and economic development (Ghengahesh 2014; Rose et al. 2019). Therefore, the perceived benefit of EMI policy appears to be influenced by students’ and teachers’ abilities in the language of instruction, which suggests that individual success in education and societal development depends on good mastery of English language. In many contexts, including HEIs in Ethiopia, where students have insufficient proficiency in English, learning remains at a surface level, and teachers often resort to code-switching to facilitate learning. As Rose and Galloway (2019) indicate the English-only policy in multilingual HEIs has been challenged and the pedagogical value of code-switching has been receiving recognition among

EMI researchers. However, in some settings code-switching can be the source of educational inequality. In the Ethiopian context, students of diverse linguistic backgrounds are unlikely to benefit from code-switching as they may not share the same first language with their EMI teachers. Drawing on the debate about the role of linguistic competency in implementing EMI policy, the next section discusses language-related challenges in the implementation of the policy in Ethiopian HEIs.

## Challenges in EMI policy implementation

### **Language-related challenges**

Ethiopian higher education policy is highly centralized by the Ministry of Education. For instance, placement of students to university programmes can only be processed by the ministry. Universities have no authority over recruiting students to their institutions but can only assign, according to students' interest and spaces available, to EMI programmes on their campuses. To enrol for higher education programmes, students need to pass university entrance exams taken at the end of secondary education.

However, the standard of higher education has been undermined by the lack of quality students being prepared at the pre-tertiary level (Ministry of Education 2015) attributed partly to students' poor competency in English. Having studied all academic subjects through the medium of English for four years in secondary schools, students enter HEIs based on the assumption that those who pass university entrance exams have sufficient proficiency level to cope with the demand of university education through English. However, a comprehensive study commissioned by the government to review the standard of education (Teferra et al. 2018) highlighted that university students' poor command of English has been impacting the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs. To maximize students' English proficiency level, universities offer compulsory English-language courses along with other academic disciplines, such as the concurrent support model described by Macaro (2018), to all first-year undergraduate students. The courses lasting over two terms focus on developing students' writing and communication skills.

However, since the courses are offered irrespective of students' field of study, there appears to be lack of integration between students' language needs and their subject of studies. A case study that investigated English-language needs

of business students at Adama Technology University and medical students at Haramaya University reported that the gap between students' language needs and the English courses offered remain wide as students still struggle to accomplish academic tasks while studying EMI contents (Gelan et al. 2015; Moghnode and Woldemariam 2015). To mitigate students' linguistic challenges, the government introduced English-language improvement programme in which universities identify struggling students and offer English-language support outside normal contact hours. However, the impact of the programme on the students' proficiency level has not been investigated and the language proficiency problem persists.

As discussed in the previous section, proficiency in the language of instruction appears to play a vital role in the quality of academic achievements (Ghenghesh 2014). In line with Ghenghesh, other studies (e.g. Rose et al. 2019) have shown that in English taught programmes general English-language proficiency appears to be a significant predictor of students' academic performance. However, despite a relatively long history of EMI in higher education in Ethiopia, students' and teachers' lack of competence in English has been partly blamed for the deteriorating quality of learning outcomes for the graduates (Negash 2006; Taye 2019). Traditional teaching methods and lack of resources combined with lack of opportunities for the students to practise their English outside educational institutions have contributed to poor competency in English. As a result, despite the official policy line that stipulates English as a sole medium of instruction in HEIs, code-switching has been a common classroom practice in the rapidly expanding HEIs in Ethiopia.

### **The impact of massification policy**

Within the context of widening participation and increasing economic competitiveness, massification of higher education has become a worldwide phenomenon in the past thirty years. A similar trend has been observed in SSA countries where enrolments for university education have grown faster than in any other region in the world (Akalu 2016). Similarly, as Ethiopia has embarked on an ambitious plan to alleviate poverty and align itself with lower-middle income countries by 2030 (Teferra et al. 2018), it has expanded its HEIs to provide the economy with skilled human capital. Thus, the government has increased the number of public universities from 2 to 50 since the expansion began in 2000 (Tamrat 2020). The private HEIs have also expanded to over 250 colleges and 4 major universities. The overall number of students in HEIs has

significantly increased with average enrolment standing at 13.8 per cent in 2020 compared to only 0.8 per cent before 2000. Currently, over one million students attend university education in both public and private HEIs. As a result, higher education in Ethiopia has moved from a small elite to a mass system in the past twenty years.

However, the efforts to expand higher education come with great opportunities for the development of skilled human capital in the country as well as challenges that have undermined the quality of quantitatively expanding EMI programmes across HEIs (Semela 2011). Universities must teach through English – a foreign language mostly limited to education – presenting myriad issues as most students, especially in rural Ethiopia, have limited English proficiency. Along with the massification policy, the government adopted a special admission (affirmative action) policy for students from historically deprived federal states (Akalu 2016) to maximize their participation in university education. However, a qualitative study conducted to investigate the experience of these group of students at Addis Ababa University reported the academic and social challenges they face during the first year of their studies ‘due to lack of preparation at high school and absence of special support system in the university’ (Shimekit 2018: 39). As Galloway and Ruegg (2020) and Milligan, et al. (2016) have highlighted provision of academic and language support for students on different EMI programmes can significantly enhance their academic performances, which does not appear to be the case in the Ethiopian context. This implies that despite the positive discrimination policies, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are unlikely to succeed in their university education due to lack of language support.

Consequently, the focus on expansion policy has overshadowed the focus on quality of provision. The decline in the quality of educational outcomes for the new graduates has been extensively documented (Akalu 2016; Ministry of Education 2020; Semela 2011). Graduates’ lack of communication skills, inability to read and produce written report in English are cited as evidence of poor educational outcomes. By implication, Ethiopia’s ambitious plan of lifting its citizens out of poverty is dependent partly on students’ strong command of English for successful completion of university education with the skills and knowledge that enable them to meet the demand of the twenty-first-century job markets. Thus, higher education massification policy alone does not guarantee economic growth without research into the effectiveness of EMI programmes and provision of adequate resources to support its implementation.

## EMI research reports

Unlike primary education where positive correlation between the multilingual education policy and students' strong learning outcomes have been observed, there seems to be a mismatch between the expansion policy and quality of students' academic performance in Ethiopian HEIs. The implementation of EMI policy can be characterized mainly by a lack of quality in educational outcomes for the graduates. For instance, when the Ministry of Education recruited ten thousand new university graduates for the newly established universities' teaching position in 2015, the sweeping majority of the candidates failed to pass qualifying exams in their specialist subjects (Woldegiyorgis 2018). The causes of poor performance can be attributed to different factors, including low proficiency levels in English. Existing EMI studies on Ethiopia HEIs generally report on students' language-related challenges. A few selected research reports will be discussed in this section.

A mixed method study conducted at Hawassa University to investigate students' level of difficulty in comprehending lectures reported that only 4 per cent of the respondents were able to comprehend 90 per cent of lecture contents delivered through English, while 77 per cent of them were able to comprehend only up to 50 per cent of the lecture content (see Aberra 2016). Although, deficiency in English has been highlighted for students' difficulty in lecture comprehension, language support available to the students has not been discussed in the report. Similarly, a quantitative study that investigates students' attitude to code-switching at Bahir Dar University has reported that 90 per cent of students in the study have indicated they were in favour of teachers' switching from English to Amharic to aid their comprehension of the content (Teklesellassie and Boersma 2018), which implies students' lack of proficiency to comprehend EMI content. Additionally, a qualitative study that interviewed graduate-level lecturers to explore factors affecting quality of education at Addis Ababa University echoed a similar experience. In his findings, Akalu (2016) reports that students' lack of participation in classroom interaction is not because of a lack of ideas but a lack of proficiency in English. The study, like a study by Teklesellassie and Boersama (2018), reveals that students' comprehension and participation increase when teachers switch to Amharic. As Kirkpatrick (2014) points out, unless the learner has sufficient proficiency in the English language, complex tasks cannot be successfully understood in EMI content learning; thus, the first language is an appropriate medium for such learning. Although students can benefit from code-switching as it helps gain content knowledge, it can also



be the sources of educational inequality in multilingual Ethiopian universities classrooms, as highlighted in the next research report.

A qualitative study conducted through interviewing EMI students of diverse linguistic backgrounds at Kotebe Metropolitan University reported that students from non-Amharic-speaking backgrounds ‘suffer passivity’ in classrooms (Taye 2019) when teachers code-switch to Amharic to describe complex concepts. As students receive primary education in their local languages, and Amharic is taught as a subject only from grade five with little interest to teach and learn the language, many students lack the required level of proficiency in Amharic when they get to universities. This language policy has led to lack of a common language for interethnic communication which has also resulted in frequent violent clashes among ethnically rival university students (see the Guardian 2020). There is strong evidence that HEIs in the country face increasing challenges due to language barriers linked with linguistically diverse student population. As a result, many scholars call for policymakers to review the current monolingual EMI policy and consider flexible language-in-education model to foster unity and facilitate learning at all levels of education.

## Conclusion

This chapter presents the overall picture of EMI policy and practice in Ethiopian HEIs focusing on language related challenges and the impact of the expansion policy on the implementation of EMI policy. Despite research evidence about the challenges in the medium of instruction neither the government nor universities have a comprehensive language policy to improve students’ deficiency in English-language skills. Additionally, owing to the expansion of universities in all federal states in the country, the gap in academic success among university students seems to be widening as students from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds get better access to English-learning resources thereby improving their chances of success in university education.

Education plays an important role in promoting development in a society, and language is essential to facilitate it. However, Ethiopian HEI expansion to increase access and participation in university education does not take the country out of poverty unless there is a change in the standard of the language of instruction across its HEIs. Future research may be able to explore strategies on how students’ English proficiency levels can be improved and supported to enhance the quality of EMI provision.

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