

# Comparative Analysis of Instructional Language Issues in Ethiopia and the United States

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Crafting and implementing language policies that address the needs of language minority students have always been challenging. The major challenges include addressing such concerns as: How do we address the language needs of minority students, while keeping the academic standards high? Should the role of minority Language be cultural maintenance or the facilitation of instruction through the mother tongue? To what extent does the use of minority language prepare the child for the global world? Through comparative analysis of practices in the United States and Ethiopia, this paper explores the background, approaches, and challenges/controversies in implementing policies that cater for language minority children in the two countries.

*Keywords:* Instructional Language, Mother Tongue, Language Policy, Ethiopia, United States

## Introduction

Effectively teaching language minority children has been an issue debated among educators, policy makers, parents and other stakeholders. The debate even gets more complicated in nations with multiethnic/multilingual societies than those with comparatively fewer numbers of spoken languages. Policies aimed at addressing the needs of language minority students have been challenged from various groups. The major challenges include addressing such concerns as: which ethnic groups reserve the right of introducing their language as a medium of instruction and how does such practice impact national interest and even national unity? How do we address the language needs of minority students while keeping the academic standards high? Should the role of minority language be cultural maintenance or the facilitation of instruction through the mother tongue? To what extent does the use of minority language prepare the child for the global world?

By presenting common practices and models in addressing the instructional language practices in the United States and Ethiopia, the article explores the background, approaches, and challenges/controversies in implementing policies that cater for language minority children in the two countries. Finally, it presents the similarities and differences between the practices in the two countries and draws lessons to Ethiopia on how non-native speakers can learn in multilingual nations.

## Background on Educating Language Minority Students in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's education system has been undergoing fundamental change following the collapse of the socialist regime in 1991. The change encompasses many aspects of the education system including the policy, management, organizational structure, teacher training, and the curriculum. A once highly centralized administration of the Federal Ministry of Education, has now been decentralized into many states, district-level

bureaus, and departments demarcated along ethnic/language lines. The decentralization process has been packaged with various change initiatives one of which is the change in language/medium of instruction.

Until the current government took power in 1991, the media of instruction in Ethiopia's formal education system were Amharic (for elementary level) and English (for junior high and above). Whereas the socialist government (1974-1991) had encouraged the use of some 15 ethnic languages in non-formal education, the imperial regime (that ruled the country until 1974) preferred to use one official language (Amharic) with the intention of safeguarding national integrity.

## Instructional Language Policy in Ethiopia

With a total population of 73,918,505, the May 2007 Ethiopia's Population and Housing Census puts the nation to be the second most populous country in Africa (CSA, 2008). Ethiopia is a country with rich and diverse ethnic/linguistics composition with 80 languages actively spoken. However, one language (Amharic) remained to be the national language and the medium of instruction throughout much of the country's history. It is only in 1974, when the socialist government took power that the uses of other ethnic languages were given emphasis for instructional purpose.

Several questions can be raised to further understand what contributed for the dominance of Amharic. It is worth noting at this juncture the country's history, and mainly its government system. For several centuries, Ethiopia had been under a feudal monarchy where democratic values such as addressing language/ethnic issues were down on the bottom of its agenda. Rather, the monarchy advocated the notion that the use of one national language is imperative for the country's integrity. Thus, introducing other languages for instructional purpose had been conceived as courting national disintegration. Proponents of this idea credit using one language as a medium of instruction for the country's long history of independence.

In the past four decades several attempts were made to ad-

dress the issues of languages of instruction in the non-formal and formal education sectors. From the late 70s to the early 90s, the socialist regime that replaced the monarchy promoted a policy to conduct non-formal literacy programs in fifteen ethnic languages (Ayalew, 1999). The other policy decision by the socialist regime was transcribing these languages in the Ethiopic script (traditionally used for Semitic languages in the country). Almost all of these languages were in unwritten form until that time. However, the socialist government did not push forward to use them as instructional languages in the formal system.

In 1991, when the current government took power, it demarcated the state/regional boundaries along ethnic lines and provided the new states the autonomy to choose their state's working languages and to implement a decision on new instructional language policy. As a result the new ethnic-based states were demarcated into 14 (at least initially) ethnic-based boundaries that comprised as many as 20 ethnic groups per state. The number of languages used as media of instruction varies from state to state. In the Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) alone, for instance, eight local languages of instruction have been in use at the primary level (Cohen, 2000).

### Ethiopia's Approach

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. This approach has been reflected in the implementation of the instructional language policy. The specific aspects of the issues associated with this approach has been discussed below.

### Major Issues on the New Instructional Language Policy in Ethiopia

The instructional language policy has been compounded by several challenges. The major ones being: intrusion of political agenda, the problem of mixed communities, regional disparities in readiness and resources, and the push to monolingualism. Each of these problems is discussed below.

#### Intrusion of Political Agenda

Proponents of the newly instituted instructional policy of Ethiopia do not seem to argue for its pedagogical merits as they do for its political advantage. They tend to value the gains in terms of the rights of the language groups to use their ethnic language more so than its instructional advantages. Putting high premium to political gains has been typical of various educational change initiatives in Ethiopia. The instructional language policy formulation process is a case in point. Right after the current government took power in 1991, it convened a conference in Addis Ababa from July 2-6, 1991 (Ayalew, 1999) and issued a policy guideline for immediate implementation of instruction in 5 major ethnic languages at the primary level. In addition, the Ethiopic alphabets that were in use by at least 15 ethnic languages for non-formal education purpose during the socialist era was questioned and a decision was reached to use Latin alphabet for the *Qushtic* languages (which represent the

southern and eastern parts of the country) and to retain *Ethiopic* alphabet for the *semetic* language groups (that constitute most of the languages in the northern part of the country). These important decisions were made in a political gathering where educators and community/ethnic representatives were missing from the table. Moreover, by the time the national Education and Training Policy (that gives provisions to implement ethnic languages for instruction) was signed into law in 1994, several states have already implemented the language policy. For these reasons, detractors argue that the policy formulation process of the new instructional languages lacks systematic effort to explore the pros and cons of using certain languages and scripts for instructional purpose; thereby amplifying the political motivation of the process. As Getachew and Derib (2006) argue, "political decision took over the conscious planning and consultation with professionals" (p. 58).

### The Problem of Mixed Communities

In Ethiopia, the settlement pattern is mostly mixed where minority language speakers live within a dominant ethnic group territories, especially in urban and suburban areas. When the new policy was implemented in 1991 (as per the decision of political parties), no arrangement was made for children in these communities. The language minority children in mixed communities were then forced to learn in languages that they do not speak or what is called in a complete immersion model. As a result, minority parents had to pull their children out of schools, and enrollment witnessed a dramatic drop in the areas settled by mixed communities (Hoben, 1995). This practice negates the 1953 United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommendations that stated "if mixed groups are unavoidable, instruction should be in the language which gives the least hardship to the bulk of the pupils, and special help should be given for those who do not speak the language of instruction" (as cited in UNESCO, 2003: p. 28).

### Regional Disparities in Readiness and Resources

The language policy introduced by the current government is just one among several reform initiatives packaged in decentralization of the education system. Decentralization gets crippled when nexus between regional and local constituencies is lacking. Many authors (Swanson, 2000; Gibton, Sabar, & Goldring, 2000) contend that success in decentralization depends on how well efforts are integrated to ensure the attainment of common societal goals. The implementation of the instructional language policy seems to have been affected by disparities in capacities. Most language minority regions/states in Ethiopia are disadvantaged not only in infrastructures but also in educated manpower who speak the minority language. As a result, in some disadvantaged regions, individuals as under-qualified as seventh grade dropouts were assigned as district (*woreda*) education supervisors and as primary teachers just to fill positions by individuals who speak the needed language (Alemu & Tekleselassie, 2006). In addition, no sufficient material preparation was made by the time the implementation was declared and for several years afterwards (Dereje, 2001). Thus, many educators argue that the instructional language policy plays a role in widening the existing disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged ethnic groups.

### The Push to Monolingualism

The new instructional language policy has been a product of

a political move that pushed each ethnic region/state adopts its own official language. By so doing, each state promotes a monolingual education where the national official language (Amharic) is abandoned by the overwhelming majority of the new ethnic based states. As a result, what has been practiced in Ethiopia is reduced to monolingual model rather than bilingual or multilingual education.

### **Background on Educating Language Minority Students in the United States**

Despite the claims of the critics to subscribe bilingual education to some political interest groups, evidences account that it has always been the fact of life in the American society. Part of the evidence is derived from the US Constitution. Beiren (1993) documents that, the forefathers, who framed the US constitution deliberately reserved the choice of language to the individual. Given this broad provision (yet subject to various interpretations), the practice of bilingual education started as early as 1600, with German speaking Americans, opening the first school that catered both in German and English (Beiren, 1993). In the years that followed, the instruction of children in the language other than English obtained further legal ground, with several state laws authorizing the practice.

During the early history of America, elements of language repression were rare and immigrant populations enjoyed the right to use their language for instructional purpose. The problem however came to picture during World War II (Rothstein, 2000). Following the War, anti German sentiments grew and American nationalism came to picture. Triggered by the trend, 15 states passed legislation on English as their official language. The situation then shifted against bilingual education forcing many immigrant students to join English immersion classes (NEA, 2000).

A revival of bilingual education came during the 1960s (NEA, 2000; Beiren, 1993). Among other things, the severe drop out rates among language minority students, and a series of court cases accentuated the need. Most importantly, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 laid a foundation by requiring school districts to provide additional support to Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. It also served as stepping stone for the adoption of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968. As per the act, limited Federal funding was assigned for LEP students who met the poverty criteria. Later, the program included other LEP students.

After a period of relative success, several factors again conspired to swing back the balance from bilingual education to English immersion classes. The challenge first came from cultural uniformists and conservative ideologues who, among other things, questioned the involvement of the federal government in language choice, which according to them is the jurisdiction of local districts (NEA, 2000). Since 1980s events against bilingual education further conspired; the new federalism ideal of the Regan Administration, and the English only movement were the most influential ones to this effect (Duignan, 2000). After the 1990s, on the one hand, the drift towards globalizations is bringing a renewed interest on bilingual education. On the other hand, some states are taking measures to outlaw its practice. Under these circumstances, the issue has become subject of debate crossing several issues.

### **The United States' Approach**

Educating language minority in the United States has a very

long and complicated history. No one approach has been implemented to address the issue in a uniform manner. States have tried varied approaches from complete immersion, bilingual education, to English as a Second Language (ESL). The philosophies behind each approach have proponents and opponents as discussed below.

### **Controversies around Teaching Language Minority Students in the United States**

The major debates on teaching language minority students in the United States can be categorized in five areas of controversy: pedagogical approaches, public opinion, culture, globalization, and politics. All are presented in brief below

#### **Debate over Pedagogical Approaches: Bilingual Education vs. English Immersion**

One major debate on both sides (Bilingual education and English immersion proponents) tends to be the pedagogical superiority of one method over the other and its impact on the school performance among LEP students. Proponents of bilingual education argue that children advance in both English and other subjects when native language instruction is used and the transition to English is gradual (Zehr, 2000; Krashen, 2000). Central to this assertion is the threshold hypothesis (Cummins cited in Mitchell et al., 1999; Krashen, 2000) in which knowledge of primary language is assumed to facilitate learning in the second language (i.e. English). Cummins further warns, children in English immersion classes are more likely to eventually end up monolingual (in English) despite their mother tongue spoken at home.

By contrast, the critics of bilingual education assume that rapid and intensive English instruction is the fastest path to English and subject area mastery. The central notion here is the interference hypothesis that asserts learning second language is best facilitated when learners are immersed in the second language and given minimal support in their first language (NEA, 2000; Unz, 2000).

#### **Controversy over Public Opinion**

Throughout the debate over bilingual education both the proponents and the opponents try to win the support of the public, and mainly that of parents. Cases of parental opinions are widely documented in either side of the debate. Opponents question why bilingual education has been put in place in the face of growing parental dissatisfaction about its efficacy (Chavez & Amselle, 1997). Widely documented in their study are the Hispanic parent reaction in Los Angeles, and Denver, the Latino family revolt in New York, in all of which parents preferred English immersion classes to bilingual education. Other evidences are also common.

The proponents of bilingual education, however, tend to reject this accusation. They argue that most of the alleged parental grievances over bilingual education are associated with certain practices (such as inappropriate placement of children) than with the program itself (Krashen, 2000). They also question the way opinions are drawn from parents. Biased questions (for example the association of the two programs with future job opportunities) are among the reasons, according to proponents, that have been misinterpreted for parental grievances over bilingual education.

### Controversy over Culture: Transition or Maintenance

The debate over bilingual education often takes both groups into the issue of bicultural education as well. On the one hand, the supporters of bilingual education put a bitter blame on the melting pot ideal of Americanizing immigrant as the harshest treatment of degrading the culture and heritages of immigrant children. They maintain that American schools had been prone to reinforce existing ethnic, racial, social class hierarchies. They further lament that first generation immigrants were able to get into the middle class “not because of but in spite of,” their schooling (Duigma, 2000: p. 2).

On the other hand, the critics charge the trend of associating bilingual education with bicultural education as the greatest historic mistake. The critics further question the potential outcome of this instance on the future of LEP students. For them, the claim that bilingual education serves as instrument to instill ethnic pride, or as a therapy for low self-esteem, will only keep immigrants tied to their old culture, further maximizing the cost of their transition to the American culture.

In addition, critics also question whether it is the role of schools to focus on either cultural transition or cultural maintenance. This question is mainly relevant in terms of the role of bilingual education as has originally been deemed necessary for LEP students. The original intention of the program, as well as the belief of Federal authorities, was that the program helps serve as a transition to English mainstream programs (EFF, 2000). Authors (for example, Shultz, 2000; Duigma, 2000), however documented evidences contrary to this claim. Many schools, for example, keep students in bilingual classes after they have become proficient in English. By so doing, bilingual programs are accused of becoming instrumental for cultural maintenance. The critics further dub the trend as a de facto reversal to segregation, a turnaround of the same rights immigrants were decrying at the time when public schools were segregated.

### Globalization as an Issue of Controversy

The advocates of bilingual education reduce their detractors as tracking behind times when they establish the importance of bilingual education in light of the current trend toward globalization (Rodriguez, 1998). Bilingual children, the proponents argue, are assets to the nation; whereas, monolinguals are disadvantaged to effectively function in several national endeavors (such as the enforcement of law and intelligent gathering) that eventually affect the role of the country in a competitive global economy.

The move towards globalization, however, is not perceived as a threat by the advocates of English-immersion. They posit that if other languages such as Chinese or Spanish capture world importance, English ranks in a class by itself. They further argue that fluency in Spanish or Chinese may provide a significant advantage, but lack of literacy in English represents a “crippling or fatal disadvantage in our global economy” (Unz, 1998:1).

### Political Controversies

The issue of language of instruction has often been politicized. In circumstances where politics intrude into pedagogy, the real actors on the matter will be pushed out of the scene, and the instructional role of schools will be displaced for political motives. As Shultz (1998) observes, through the debate

over bilingual education, the political fortunes of the program have been defended by group of self-appointed academics, educators, civil right advocates and other ardent believers. The parents, whose children participate in bilingual education, Shultz laments, are left as spectators. Still worse, both groups orchestrate parents for political purposes. In extreme case, the intrusion of politics is even felt in the classroom. Duigma (2000), for example, notes a forceful *Spanglish* attempt of the 1970s in which 750 black children were put in Spanish or Chinese classes. What compounds this absurdity, as Duigma, dubs is that not one of those children speak either language at home. Hence, the central issue—what is better to educate language minorities—gets derailed and political interest overtakes.

### Similarities and Differences between Practices in Ethiopia and the United States

Although the social, economic, political and overall developmental contexts differ between the two countries, there are some similarities and differences worth mentioning with regard to addressing the issues of language minority students.

#### Similarities

One of the similarities is that both are multicultural nations. Multicultural nations face more challenges with regard to crafting inclusive policies than those with less diverse communities. The other similarity is, in both countries, most educational policy and change initiatives appear to be addressed in a top-down approach. The newly implemented Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia and the No Child Left Behind Act of the United States are good examples. Moreover, in both countries, intrusion of politics on educational matters often overlooks the pedagogical advantages to children. Election season debates and speeches are evident in both countries.

#### Differences

Four main differences can be mentioned. First, there is a clear difference in perception of minority groups about the mainstream language. In the Ethiopia’s case, the mainstream language, Amharic is perceived by minority language speakers as a language of the oppressor by linking it to the long history of power dominantly held by Amharic speakers. As a result adversarial tone is apparent between minority language proponents toward the mainstream language. In the case of the United States, the value of the mainstream language, English, for social mobility is not questioned. Rather, the debate is on how minority language speakers can better learn and assimilate.

The second difference is that language minorities in the US are immigrants or children of immigrants unlike Ethiopia where language minorities are natives who always lived in the country. Potentially, this would be an advantage to Ethiopia due to cultural connections that could facilitate understanding. In reality, however, the debate in instructional language issues in Ethiopia often focuses on differences rather than similarities. As a result, in Ethiopia’s case, children’s pedagogical needs are downplayed and cultural maintenance is overplayed. This is partly due to the tone set by the country’s education policy that over-emphasized on non-pedagogical element of instructional language benefit, specifically “to recognize the rights of nations/nationalities to learn in their language” (FDRE, 1994: p. 10). In the US, however, the direction of the debate is on how to meet the pedagogical advantage of children while maintain-

ing the culture.

The third difference between Ethiopia's and the United States' approach in addressing instructional language issues has to do with the roles federal and local level government play. In Ethiopia, state governments have very limited autonomy where the federal government sets the political tone on how local/state level administration implements policies. As a result, the instructional language policy did not take into account regional disparities in resource and capabilities of the states which is exhibited by inconsistent and controversial implementation. In the United States, there is a clear power structure and role between the federal, states, and school level administration on formulating and implementing policies.

The fourth difference is on the focus of the debate itself. Two very important issues of debate in the United States: public opinion and globalization are missing from the instructional language debate in Ethiopia. Part of the reasons for lack of public opinion is the absence of vibrant free press and the policy formulation process that excludes grassroots voices. On the other hand, obsession of the policy makers on internal matters motivated by political expediency (centered in ethnic politics) has result in ignoring the implications of globalization on language policy.

## Conclusion and Implications

Educating bilingual children in the United States focuses on helping immigrants with limited English proficiency to be able to master English so that they can learn as their native classmates. The practices and debates range from bilingual education to English immersion (structured) to English as a second language (ESL) although consensus on choosing the best method/program seems impossible (at least for now). The comparative advantages of each method should be seen from its benefits to the children. While legislations like proposition 227 in California conclude that society is favoring English immersion there is still apprehension from bilingual proponents that the current trend in globalization, where multilingualism/bilingualism appears a big plus, might put not only the children but also the country at the disadvantaged end.

As in the United States, public opinion on teaching language minority children is diverse in Ethiopia. Politicians, in both countries have been playing roles in intensifying the debates on educating language minorities not only by supporting or opposing a certain pedagogical approach but also by injecting such sensitive issues as civil rights and ethnic equality.

In Ethiopia, the government attempts to address the issues by instituting a policy of teaching students in their mother tongue. Educating children in their mother tongue has several potential advantages: it closes the gap between home and school language (Krashen, 2000; Rothstein, 1998), increases the commitment of parents to school affairs (Rothstein, 1998), and raises the educational performance of respective communities (Rodriguez, 1998). At the same time, it is worth noting that these potential advantages would be realized only when suitable conditions prevail. Given the problems that the instructional language policy has encountered (such as intrusion of politics, problems with mixed communities, and lack of regional readiness) during its implementation, it is reasonable to question the extent to which the intended advantages have been gained.

Ethiopia's new education policy states provisions that allow each ethnic group to teach in its own language. As a multilingual nation of eighty language/ethnic groups, the implementa-

tion of Ethiopia's language policy, however, has not been an easy task. This is further complicated by the varying size of the ethnic groups that speak the languages. Of the total 80 languages spoken in the country, for example, 56 of them are spoken in one (SNNPR) region/state (Getachew & Derib, 2006). While providing education in as many as 56 languages per state/region is potentially allowed by the policy, its feasibility has been unjustifiably overlooked.

In Ethiopia's case, it can be deduced that the instructional language policy has been more effective in cultural maintenance rather than addressing the academic needs of specific minority ethnic groups/students. This is in conformity with the "success story" told by Ethiopia's Ministry of Education (1999) that the instructional language policy has promoted a sense of realizing ethnic identity and community culture and public participation in educational matters.

Also, the implementation is more of a complete immersion model than bilingual/multilingual education. In an ideal bilingual model, the total number of language spoken in the community, the number of students speaking each language, and their distribution across grade levels is taken into account (McKeon, 1987). Bilingual models use the students' home language in addition to the instructional language. This is followed by marshalling the resources needed to support the program which includes teachers that are proficient in both the students' language and the instructional language (McKeon, 1987). Ethiopia's language policy lacks such important considerations and commitment. Thus, to get the pedagogical advantage of bilingualism/multilingualism, the country should refocus on the practical implications of the instructional language policy in a lens different from political advantage that only contributes to cultural maintenance.

Bilingual/multilingual students are generally more likely to be successfully function in the global marketplace than their monolingual counterparts. However, *not all languages are created equal* when it comes to the doors they open in the global market. For example, everything else equal, a bilingual person proficient in English and Spanish is more likely to successfully function in the United States than a multilingual person proficient in *Amharic, Oromiffa, Tigray* and *Affar* languages (Ethiopia's local languages). While maintaining culture is an important aspect, equipping citizens with skills to function in the global marketplace is crucial. Thus, it will be more than wise to craft language policies in view of this greater good.

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