

INSTRUCTIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN ETHIOPIA: MOTIVATED BY POLITICS OR THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN?

Introduction

Following the change of government in 1991, Ethiopia's education system has been undergoing fundamental change. No part of the education system has been left untouched. A centralized administration was replaced by a decentralized one in line with the principle of federalism under which the current government has been organized. The federal Ministry of Education, which was highly centralized in the past, has now been decentralized into many states, district-level bureaus, and departments demarcated on ethnic lines. The decentralization process, in addition to devolving authority, has brought with it various change initiatives, one of which is the change in media of instruction.

Until the current government took power, 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 (1974–91) had encouraged the use of some 15 ethnic languages in non-formal education, the imperial regime (which ruled the country until 1974) preferred to use one official language (Amharic) with the intention of safeguarding national integrity.

According to the 1994 census, more than 80 ethnic groups exist in Ethiopia. The new ethnic-based states were demarcated into 14 (at least initially) ethnic-based boundaries that comprise 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).

The authors of this work appreciate the advantages of vernacular education for children but argue that rushing to formulate and to implement the new instructional language policy, without considering such factors as the existing unbalanced level of development among the newly created states and the absence of any meaningful preparation to deliver education in the newly chosen languages, appears to be more of a political gimmick than a sound pedagogical move. The current study intends to explain the formulation, implementation, and outcome of Ethiopia's instructional language policy in light of the PRINCE system of power analysis as adapted by Fowler (2004) along with several literature references pertinent to the issue. After providing a brief background on Ethiopia and its education and language of instruction policies, this article analyzes the formulation and implementation of Ethiopia's present instructional language policy and problems therein.

Background

Ethiopia

According to the census data of 1994 (the most recent year for which data are available), Ethiopia has a population of 63 million, the second largest in Sub-Saharan Africa. About 83% of the population lives in rural areas engaged in subsistence agriculture. As per the census, the adjusted total fertility rates are 6.74 for the country, 4.5 for urban areas and 7.2 for rural areas. The estimated infant mortality rate for the country is 11.6%. The primary school age population (7–14) constitutes 12.6 million, while the secondary school age population (15–18) totals 5.58 million. About half of the population is female.

Religion is one of the socio-cultural characteristics of the population. According to the census, the composition by religion shows that 50.6% are Orthodox Christian, 32.8% Muslim, 10.2% Protestant, 4.6% followers of traditional religion, and 1.6% constituted by other religions.

Ethnic diversity is one of the most important attributes of the population. The 1994 census data identified over 80 ethnic groups in the country. The distribution of the major ethnic groups and their proportions in the population are provided in the Appendix.

Education in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is unique from other African countries in that it was never colonized by any foreign power except a five year invasion by Italy from 1936 to 1941. An ancient nation, with the legend of the Queen of Sheba, Ethiopia “may have had its origin in the early period of Sabeen migration to Africa” (Wagaw, 1979, p. 2). Also, Ethiopia is one of the few countries in the world with a long-standing literary history (Tekeste, 1996) and with its own scripts still actively in use. The country’s current educational status, however, is strikingly disappointing even at the African standard. According to the 2002/03 educational annual abstract of the Ministry of Education, the gross enrollment ratio at primary and secondary school levels respectively was 64.4 and 19.3 percent. The enrollment ratio in higher education stands below 1% of the expected age group (Ministry of Education, 1999).

Low as the enrollment rate has been, severe gender and regional disparities further compound it. While women make up 50% of the population, they represent only 41.2% of primary, 36.6% of secondary, and 20.5% of tertiary level enrollment (Ministry of Education, 2003). The regional disparity in primary school gross enrollment rates (which include over-age students) ranges from the lowest of 13.8% to the highest of 135.4% (Ministry of Education, 2003). Variations are also large between rural and urban areas.

Among the several reasons for Ethiopia’s low educational development and its impact on the socioeconomic development of the country, the major ones are harsh treatment with socialism for seventeen years and periodic war and famine (Cummings, 1999). Nationals by and large also

blame the country's dismal educational record on unsound policies of successive governments. It is partly and thusly against this backdrop that the new policy was envisaged.

The Policy on Language of Instruction in Ethiopia: Values and Philosophies

Despite the fact that Ethiopia is a multilingual country, a single language (Amharic) had been the medium of instruction at the elementary school level throughout much of the country's history. It was only in 1974, when the socialist government came to power, that the use of ethnic languages (also called "nationality languages" since the current government uses the latter terminology synonymously with "ethnic languages" in its official documents) for instructional purposes was considered as an issue. Why did it take such a long time for ethnic languages to become a policy issue in Ethiopia? One may find part of the answer for this question in the country's history, and mainly in its system of government. For several centuries, Ethiopia had been under a feudal monarchy. It was thus quite inconceivable for the imperial regime to address ethnic issues that are enshrined in democratic values. The government's determination to bury ethnic languages out of the policy agenda may also correspond with the country's long history of independence. Successive imperial regimes advocated for the use of one national language as an instrument for maintaining the country's integrity. Introducing other languages for instructional purposes had been conceived as courting national disintegration. In all cases, the imperial regime was not long-sighted enough to perceive the danger of imposing one national language on the multiethnic nation, which was like "a defacto declaration of war on the others" (Seyoum, 1997, p. 2).

The socialist government that assumed the mantle of leadership in 1974 shifted from promoting one language as an instrument for national unity to encouraging the use of other languages as per its political orientations. One notable effort during this time was the policy decision to conduct adult literacy programs in fifteen ethnic languages (Ayalew, 1999). The literacy program (campaign) started in 1979 and ended only at the fall of the socialist government in 1991. The other noteworthy policy decision by the socialist regime was on transcribing these languages in the Ethiopic script (traditionally used for Semitic languages in the country) most of which were in unwritten form hitherto. However, the use of these languages was limited to the non-formal education sector and the government did not push forward to use them as instructional languages in the formal system (Ayalew, 1999). Hence, Amharic (a Semitic language) remained as the only national language that was used as the medium of instruction for formal education at the elementary level.

When the current government came to power in 1991, a potential condition was created for ethnic languages to reemerge as a major policy issue. Two factors, among others, accentuated the need for this change. The first was the political orientation of the government. Having replaced the totalitarian socialist regime, the government shifted to introduce a kind of "Western Democracy" and its accompanying values. Liberty, equality, jus-

tice, truth, and respect for human rights became the agenda of the government (Seyoum, 1996). The second factor was the unparalleled premium placed by the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), on ethnic-based politics in the country's history. Mainly representing the Tigraway (Tigrian) ethnic group, EPRDF labeled the Amhara ethnic group as the suppressor and all the non-Amhara ethnic groups as the suppressed whose languages, traditions, and cultures had been subjugated (Seyoum, 1996). In its attempt to redress such inequalities, the government vowed the issue of ethnic languages to be its top agenda and policy priority. To that effect, one may also argue that it was an opportune time for the issue to be addressed. What requires inquiry then is how this laudable issue has been approached (i.e. the policy process).

The New Instructional Language Policy

Policy Formulation

At various points in the history of Ethiopia, political motives frustrate any systematic approach to the policy process. For instance, the historic Education Sector Review Program initiated during the early 1970s to bring fundamental educational reform in the country was aborted before implementation, having been politicized and polarized by opposing political agenda of the stakeholders, which eventually contributed to the fall of the imperial regime in 1974 (Country Studies, 1991). The formulation and implementation process of the current language policy is also a typical victim of this inadvertent trend. Soon after the current government took over as a transitional government in 1991, it convened a Conference for Peace and Democracy in Addis Ababa from July 2–6, 1991 (Ayalew, 1999). The conference, among other things, issued a policy guideline for the immediate provision of primary school instruction in five major ethnic languages. In addition to this, a decision was reached to allow choices of scripts in which the languages were to be written. Accordingly, the Latin alphabet replaced the Ethiopic alphabet for the Cushitic languages (which host most of the minority language groups) and the Ethiopic alphabet was retained for the Semitic language groups.

This decision triggers some legitimate questions. First, whom did the conference include to make this major policy decision? Obviously, the conference was constituted of political parties that claimed to represent different ethnic groups, but, as some scholars argue (for example Ayalew, 2000; Tekeste, 1996), there is no proof that the respective speakers of the language were consulted to check on their needs, nor was an attempt made to explore the pros and cons of the two scripts in terms of providing the needed linguistic and educational opportunities for children. What perhaps makes this decision even more politically motivated is the prejudice against Ethiopic alphabet because it is the script of the Amhara ethnic group that had been in power for over a century. From linguistic and economic points of view, one may argue not only the possibility of using the Ethiopic alphabet for the Cushitic languages, but also the likelihood of doing it at less cost.

Involvement of major partners in the development of the policy. From its inception, the policy of language of instruction enjoyed the support of top-level officials. As a result, it did not take much time to appear as a policy agenda, involving different partners in the course of its development. In retrospect, it seems worth inquiring as to the constituencies who were involved in formulating the official document (although it came long after several languages had been implemented).

The task of formulating the General Education Policy (the language policy being one major component) was delegated to five sub-taskforces totaling about 42 members (Seyoum, 1996). Most participants in the taskforce were from the Ministry of Education, the Addis Ababa University, and development ministries (such as Health, Agriculture, Science and Technology, etc.). Once the draft document was ready for review, the Ministry of Education held several meetings with teachers in Addis Ababa and seven other regional cities. However, the sad thing, as some writers, for example Seyoum (1996), accounted, was that no input was incorporated in the final policy as a result of the sessions held with teachers. An assessment of the draft document against the comments that the Ministry of Education had claimed to transpire shows nothing substantive, except rubber-stamping. Worse, at that point in time (and still to date), the Ethiopian Teachers' Union had split into two opposing factions (one pro-EPRDF/government and the other independent). As a result of this conflict, no important input came mainly from the independent teachers' union to help improve the draft document. Table 1 attempts to sketch the major partners by level of the policy process, for further recapitulation of their roles.

Table 1

The Involvement of Major Actors in the Policy Process

Constituency	Issue definition	Agenda setting	Policy formulation	Policy adoption	Implementation	Evaluation
Office of the Prime Minister		**		*		
Ethnic-based political parties	**	**				
Teachers' Union (government-affiliated)			**	*		
Federal Ministry of Education			**	**		*
University professors			*			
Representatives of development ministries			*			

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Constituency	Issue definition	Agenda setting	Policy formulation	Policy adoption	Implementation	Evaluation
Multilateral and bilateral foreign agencies						*
Regional Educational Bureaus					*	
Teachers and school administrators					*	
Parents					*	

** High degree of involvement. *Low degree of involvement

Table 1 illustrates some striking patterns in the policy process. The general trend is the apparent shift of roles as the policy moves from its inception to its implementation. At the initial stages, the issue was identified and defined by ethnic-based political parties, as this was very consistent with the ideological orientation of the new government. It was, therefore, not a surprise for the agenda to be acted upon by the top authorities in the Prime Minister's Office, who promote ethnic federalism and belong to EPRDF—the umbrella of ethnic-affiliated parties predominantly controlled by ethnic Tigraway. The formulation of the policy was soon delegated to the federal Ministry of Education, which subsequently solicited some participation from development ministries in addition to its own management staff. The process of policy adoption intensively involved the federal Ministry of Education. Given the pervasiveness of the issue, however, the process of adopting the policy also required the involvement of top-level officials by way of approving and ratifying the document.

As it is often the case, the intermediaries could not avoid implementing the policy. The important issue remains whether they participated in the development of the policy or not. Whereas the table shows the exclusion of grassroots-level professionals, the implication of which is obvious, what tends also to be a grave omission is that of parents who presumably have more stake than anybody else in such a tenuous issue as the language of instruction.

Major actors and their power relationships. Despite cultural differences, there are conventional approaches to the policy process. It is, for example, logical to see policy adoption come before policy implementation (Fowler, 2004). However, stimulated more by political lobby groups, the development of the language policy in Ethiopia did not follow logical stages. When the education and training policy (one major component of which is the language policy) was officially adopted in 1994, several languages had already been under implementation as per the former decision by the Council of Representatives at the 1991 conference. Thus, the education policy did not come up with the language policy on its own. Rather, it

attempted to rationalize the policy that was already under implementation by ostensibly emphasizing its pedagogical advantage: “Cognizant of the pedagogical advantages of the child learning in mother tongue and the rights of nations and nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages” (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 15).

Power relationships between the major actors in the policy process. The investigators adopted the PRINCE System of Power Analysis modified by Fowler (2004) to sketch retrospectively the key actors and their power relationships in the process of the instructional language policy of Ethiopia. The term PRINCE is an allusion to the political handbook of Machiavelli which Coplin and O’Leary (as cited in Fowler, 2004) referenced to develop a system of power analysis. Fowler (2004) modified their work from a five level scale into a three level scale as shown in Table 2. The positions range from +3 (strongly supportive) to -3 (strongly opposed) where zero is neutral. The likelihood of the policy implementation according to the PRINCE model is calculated by dividing the sum total in favor of the policy (89) by the grand total (in favor of policy plus against policy) disregarding the signs (89 + 31), which is 89/120 or 74%.

Table 2

PRINCE System of Power Analysis of Major Actors in Language Policy

Actors	Issue position	Power	Priority	Total
FOR:				
Ethnic-based political parties	+3	x	3	27
Officials of the Ministry of Education	+3	x	3	27
Teachers’ Union (government-affiliated)	+3	x	3	27
The Media (government)	+2	x	2	8
TOTAL				89
AGAINST:				
Multiethnic/cosmopolitan parties	-3	x	1	-9
Teachers’ Unions (independent)	-3	x	1	-9
The media (private press)	-2	x	1	-4
Representatives of mixed communities	-3	x	1	-9
TOTAL				-31

Source: Authors’ direct account

Table 2 explains the power relationships between the major actors in Ethiopia who are instrumental in the development and enforcement of the language policy. Not surprisingly, the actors in support of the policy

had enough power and influence (74%) to get the policy in place. The government set the pace for the balance of power. The actors in support of the policy mainly constituted what Fowler (2004, p. 155) calls ethnic-based “non-education interest groups” that had been encouraged through significant sources of power. For example, since the major media are entirely owned by the government, multiethnic parties were not able to disseminate their agenda as much as the ethnic parties did. In addition, as the authors of this article who at the time were teachers in Ethiopia observed, ethnic-based parties and the government-affiliated teacher union were provided with enough financial resources. By contrast, the actors against the policy were labeled by the ruling party as chauvinists and anti-government elements, deprived of their source of power, and discouraged through various penalties. For example, journalists of the private press, authorities of the independent teachers’ union (Prisoner of Conscience Released, 2002), and members of the cosmopolitan parties were harassed and finally imprisoned at the time the controversy surrounding the issue of language of instruction was at its peak in the country. This was basically against the values of responsible discourse where “less powerful actors should be genuinely free to take positions or choose courses of action without fear of negative repercussions” (Robinson as cited in Fowler, 2004, p. 49).

Embedded are opposing value orientations governing the major actors. While the actors in favor of the policy were gripped with the promotion of multilingual cultures, ethnic rights, and equality, the actors against the policy process emphasized its negative implications on the national integrity. The latter groups also expressed their apprehension regarding the policy’s thoughtlessness to anticipate the human and material resources needed to implement such a colossal endeavor as changing the language of instruction.

Policy Implementation

At least by default, one can learn that the premium placed on ethnic politics seems to dictate why the implementation of the language policy came prior to its formal declaration. Still, the implementation of the policy after its official adoption has special features worth addressing. One special feature in this regard was the abruptness of the process. Awakened by the official provision of the policy, several ethnic groups became part of the exercise. The approach toward implementing the policy has been characterized by extreme rush (Ayalew, 1999; Wagaw, 1999). In other words, the regions did not go for a gradual approach to introduce the policy for fear that the delay would end up in reversing their rights. Accordingly, the implementation of the language policy started immediately after 1994, by the translation of books from Amharic into other ethnic languages. The translations were also carried out for all grade levels at the same time. The use of new script for the Cushitic language groups required teacher-training institutes to offer short-term training to teachers who could speak the language, yet who were unfamiliar with the new script. This was done side-by-side with removing qualified and experi-

enced teachers and administrators who did not speak the local languages and replacing them with others “for political reasons and for their compatible ethnic origins,” thereby compromising standards (Wagaw, 1999, p. 85). In the Afar region (one of the language minority regions), for instance, individuals as under-qualified as seventh grade dropouts were assigned as district (woreda) supervisors and as primary teachers. In addition, no sufficient material preparation was made by the time the start for implementation was declared. After a decade of first unofficial and then official implementation, the then national director of curriculum and instruction, Dereje (2001), confessed that “the newly adopted media of instruction have little or no literary stocks, such as dictionaries, glossaries and other printed literature” (p. 51). With its entire shortcomings the language policy has lingered now for over 12 years, with instruction being offered in at least 20 languages.

Problems in Implementing the Language Policy

The course of implementing the language policy was so hurried that little time or opportunity was left for sound planning. As a result, by the time the policy was put into place, several problems frustrated its implementation. This section explores three apparent problems.

The first problem is the issue of mixed communities. The 1953 UNESCO recommendation states that “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” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 28). The settlement pattern of people in Ethiopia is such that mixed minority communities live side-by-side with the dominant ethnic groups, 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. Stirred by the problem witnessed in almost all parts of the country, the Ministry of Education issued a circular to all the regions (Ref No.15/1–94/19334/11) in November 1992 (Ayalew, 1999, p. 35). The circular requires regions to offer education to these communities in Amharic, the national language, employing different alternatives such as shift systems, or assigning different schools. This intervention of the government was, however, not well received in some regions until recently. As a result, parents pulled their children out of schools, and enrollment witnessed a dramatic drop in the areas settled by mixed communities (Hoben, 1995).

The second problem that emerged in the course of implementing the language policy was the mandatory use of instructional language. Two distinct positions have emerged from parents since the language policy has been put in place in Ethiopia. The first group of parents includes those who are obligated to send their children to schools that cater for ethnic language instruction even when the children do not speak the language, the sole determinant being whether the children’s surnames coincide with the ethnic group in the area. Under the circumstances, the very concept of mother tongue instruction is displaced for ethnic language instruction,

violating both the pedagogical principles that suggest children learn better using their mother tongue, as well as the UN (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* that states children shall not be denied to use their own language. As Hoben (1995) further observes the situation, the only recourse for this group of parents was to vote with their feet; hence, the falling rate of enrollment.

The second group of parents includes those whose real needs for language choice have been downplayed by political authorities. These are a special group of four ethnicities—the Welaita, Gamo, Goffa, and Dawro—in the southern parts of Ethiopia with similar, yet distinct languages. Reducing the differences among these languages to the differences of language dialect, the policymakers put them together and came up with a sort of ‘fabricated’ language called WOGAGODA. The new language was created by artificially coining the first two letters of each of the four languages. The policymakers made this decision basically because of the resource implication that providing instruction in each language would entail. Not unexpectedly, the language so created not only lacked anybody to claim it, but its implementation faced serious opposition. As Ayalew (1999) accounts, the appeals of parents and community members were finally heeded, and the decision was reversed, but only after lives were lost and property was damaged. Viewed in terms of policy development, the failure of WOGAGODA epitomizes the weaknesses of policymakers, which Fullan (2000) conceives as failure to understand the multiple realities of people, the main stakeholders in implementing the change. Under the circumstances of WOGAGODA, the decision makers not only underestimated the local realities and value systems of the community, but they also displaced the very goal of language of instruction—that is, the rights of people—for economic reasons.

The third problem stems from the lack of grassroots capacity and readiness to exercise decentralization. It is a well-recognized fact that introducing several changes at the same time reduces the potential benefits of the policy endeavor (Fowler, 2000). Most policy initiatives in Ethiopia, however, do not escape this mistake, the reason being that a new government assuming power comes up with sweeping policy changes. The language policy introduced by the current government is just one among several reform initiatives the educational system experienced in the early 1990s. A sweeping decentralization of educational organization and management, the introduction of a new teachers’ career ladder, the adoption of new curriculum, and the development of a new system of financing public higher education are among the new policies that were adopted parallel to the language policy (Ministry of Education, 1994). Exploring the several changes that the educational system has undertaken since its inception is beyond the scope of this paper. It is worthwhile, however, to address the role of decentralization, given its pervasive impact on the language policy.

Decentralization bears fruits when it engages the will and capacity of the intermediaries (Ayalew, 2000; Fowler, 2000). Owing to several changes simultaneously introduced with the language policy (and which

competed for resources) and the top-down policy process, it was unlikely for the language policy to build enough capacity or to enjoy the support and the will of intermediary implementers. Compounding the situation further is the extent to which power devolved to the implementers at the local level. According to the education and training policy, the educational system is structured into five layers: Central (federal Ministry of Education), Regional State, Zonal, District, and School levels. As per the structure, the Ministry of Education, which was in the past responsible for all aspects of public education, was not only down-scaled in terms of size and authority, but it was also reorganized and its roles redefined. The manpower in the Ministry, for example, was reduced to about 220 from a peak of 800 (Ayalew, 2000). Its functions are restricted to policy formulation and training. By contrast, the regions assumed the lion's share of responsibility commensurate with the needed authority. The problem, however, is that the authority that devolved from the center did not go any further than the regional capitals. Put differently, centralization has reproduced itself at the regional level. The implication of this trend in implementing the language policy in a country such as Ethiopia, where a single region is comprised of as many as 20 language groups, is obvious. The power of the region cuts across every single issue (including decisions such as which language to accept as the medium of instruction, choice of scripts, capacity promotion, etc.) such that it leaves little room for local constituencies to implement the policy according to their local realities. The case of WOGAGODA, discussed earlier, is one outcome of this inadvertent exercise of partial decentralization.

The other major problem of decentralization comes from lack of nexus between regional and local constituencies. As many authors (Swanson, 2000; Gibton, Sabar, & Goldring, 2000) contend, success in decentralization comes when efforts are well integrated to ensure the attainment of common societal goals. Excessive regional variations in implementing the language policy at the primary school level, for example, have affected the implementation of secondary school curriculum in Ethiopia. For instance, the policy (Ministry of Education, 1994) stipulates English as a medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. However, depending on the region, English assumes the role of a medium of instruction starting at grades 5, 7, or 9. Under such circumstances, a regional language proficiency variation is inevitable, which in turn creates unfair variation in regard to students' chances of success in secondary education and above.

Conclusions and Implications

Assigning decision-making about language use to respective ethnicities would be the surest way for promoting minority self-determination and empowerment (Hoben, 1995). It would also create opportunities for the only group of people who know the needs and language use patterns of the community to make relevant choices. Added to that, exercising instruction in the mother tongue closes the gap between home and school language (Krashen, 1997; Rothstein, 1998), increases the commit-

ment 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 policy has encountered during its implementation, it is reasonable to question the extent to which the intended goals have been addressed.

Among policymakers, the language policy has witnessed an exemplary success in spite of what its detractors say. It is, for example, noted that the policy has promoted a sense of realizing ethnic identity and community culture (Ministry of Education, 1999). The Ministry of Education also claims that the policy has raised public awareness and participation in educational matters.

These and many other claims on behalf of the policy cannot be defended, however. One major counter indicator is the alarmingly low educational achievement of language minority students for whom the policy advocated success. According to the 2003 annual educational abstract of the Ministry of Education, for instance, regional disparities by primary school net enrollment rate range from the lowest 10.0% to the highest 91.5%. As the data further show, most language minority groups performed, by and large, below the national average. For instance, of the total students who took the 2002/03 Ethiopian Higher Education Certificate Examination (EHECE), no candidate from the disadvantaged, language minority regions of Afar and Gambela has scored above 250 on a 400 grade scale (Ministry of Education, 2003). Moreover, it is evident that the gap between the regions widened after the policy was introduced in 1991. Ascribing this low performance among the disadvantaged regions to the language policy would appear judgmental. It can, however, be deduced that the policy did not help to improve the situation. If the policy did not help promote the education of the children, what purpose did it serve? Asked differently, can one establish success based upon the political gains, which have been described as a success story, thereby relegating the educational benefits of children to the status of a side dish? The answer to this question boils down to the prevailing intrusion of politics that characterized the policy since its very inception. In a situation where the major stakeholders such as educators, parents, students, and the entire public are excluded from the policy process, it is rather difficult to expect a success from the language policy, however sound its pedagogical principles and noble its political intent might be. After all, it is very unlikely for change efforts to succeed if they are entirely orchestrated by external (change) agents.

Recommendations

Introducing mother tongue education at the elementary level is desirable, at least, in principle. However, such a decision must be made in full cognizance of local and global realities and the stakeholders' level of buy-in relative to the decision.

- *Current local reality:* Ethiopia is home to more than 80 ethnic groups some of which live in distinct geographical areas while others mix and spread throughout the nation. The implementation of the current instructional language policy is crippled partly due to its failure to accommodate the nature of settlement in the country. An in-depth feasibility study that centers on the children's pedagogical needs and the settlement patterns in the country would help in the crafting of a genuine and practicable instructional language policy.
- *Global reality:* We live in an era of globalization where success and survival depend more and more on thinking and acting beyond local boxes. The authors recommend that, along with the instruction of mother tongue, children need to be given adequate opportunities to learn English, which is the lingua franca of science and technology, right from the elementary level.
- *Stakeholders' genuine participation:* Even superb policies fail when they do not have stakeholder buy-in. The current instructional language policy in Ethiopia is dictated by the ruling party in line with its political ideology rather than being based in genuine attention to student learning and, ultimately, in national economic advancement. Limiting policy discussion to 'true believers' or government ideologues—and thereby ignoring the concerns of other stakeholders—results in one-sided conclusions. Hence, genuine and broad-based participation of all concerned, including rival political parties, civic organizations, parents, students, teachers, educational administrators, religious leaders, etc., is vital to align the outcomes of the policy with the educational needs of the children. When the government takes such an inclusive and honorable position, not only does it maintain the principles of the democratic ideal. It also demystifies the political baggage that has so clouded the benefits of the language policy right from its inception however sound and lofty its pedagogical principles might have appeared.

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Appendix

Population Size of Ethiopia by Ethnic Group, Urban, and Rural

Ethnic group	Urban and rural		Urban		Rural	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All persons	53,132,276	100.00	7,315,687	100.00	45,816,589	100.00
Affar	979,367	1.84	29,879	0.41	949,488	2.00
Agew/Awingi	397,491	0.75	25,347	0.35	372,144	0.80
Agew/Kamyr	158,231	0.30	9,257	0.13	148,974	0.30
Amara	16,007,933	30.13	3,104,997	42.44	12,902,936	28.10
Anyiwak	45,665	0.09	10,037	0.14	35,628	0.00
Arborie	6,559	0.01	824	0.01	5,735	0.00
Argoba	62,831	0.12	10,958	0.15	51,873	0.10
Ari	155,002	0.29	3,808	0.05	151,194	0.33
Basketo	51,097	0.10	3,249	0.04	47,848	0.10
Bench	173,123	0.33	3,106	0.04	170,017	0.37
She	13,290	0.03	74	0.00	13,216	0.03
Mer	1,270	0.00	62	0.00	1,208	0.00
Burji	46,565	0.09	13,020	0.18	33,545	0.07
Charra	6,984	0.01	34	0.00	6,950	0.02
Dasenech	32,099	0.06	450	0.01	31,649	0.07
Dime	6,197	0.01	307	0.00	5,890	0.01
Dizi	21,894	0.04	2,439	0.03	19,455	0.04
Felasha	2,321	0.00	2,098	0.03	223	0.00
Ganjule	1,146	0.00	37	0.00	1,109	0.00
Gedeo	639,905	1.20	15,523	0.21	624,382	1.36
Gewada	33,971	0.06	893	0.01	33,078	0.07
Gidole	54,354	0.10	3,920	0.05	50,434	0.11
Guagu	173	0.00	110	0.00	63	0.00
Gumuz	121,487	0.23	1,048	0.01	120,439	0.26
Guragie	2,290,274	4.31	667,630	9.13	1,662,644	3.54
Hadiya	927,933	1.75	60,221	0.82	867,712	1.89
Mareko	38,096	0.07	2,425	0.03	35,671	0.08
Hamer	42,466	0.08	399	0.01	42,067	0.09
Harari	21,757	0.04	21,146	0.29	611	0.00
Jebelawi	118,530	0.22	3,592	0.05	114,938	0.25
Fadashi	7,323	0.01	276	0.00	7,047	0.02
Gamili	186	0.00	68	0.00	118	0.00
Gebato	75	0.00	26	0.00	49	0.00

Ethnic group	Urban and rural		Urban		Rural	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Kechama	2,740	0.01	59	0.00	2,681	0.01
Keffa	599,188	1.13	48,551	0.66	550,637	1.20
Mocha	53,897	0.10	5,069	0.07	48,828	0.11
Kemant	172,327	0.32	6,715	0.09	165,612	0.36
Kembata	499,825	0.94	56,324	0.77	443,501	0.97
Alaba	125,900	0.24	3,507	0.05	122,393	0.27
Kebena	35,072	0.07	2,177	0.03	32,895	0.07
Timbaro	86,510	0.16	3,037	0.04	83,473	0.18
Kewama	141	0.00	41	0.00	100	0.00
Koma	1,526	0.00	100	0.00	1,426	0.00
Konso	153,419	0.29	5,054	0.07	148,365	0.32
Koyra	107,595	0.20	5,900	0.08	101,695	0.22
Kunama	2,007	0.00	248	0.00	1,759	0.00
Mabaan	23	0.00	17	0.00	6	0.00
Mao	16,236	0.03	88	0.00	16,148	0.04
Me'en	52,815	0.10	1,310	0.02	51,505	0.11
Bodi	4,686	0.01	52	0.00	4,634	0.01
Malie	46,458	0.09	214	0.00	46,244	0.10
Mesengo	15,341	0.03	182	0.00	15,159	0.03
Mossiya	9,207	0.02	306	0.00	8,901	0.02
Mursi	3,258	0.01	14	0.00	3,244	0.01
Nao	4,005	0.01	14	0.00	3,991	0.01
Nuwer	64,534	0.12	3,052	0.04	61,482	0.13
Nyangatom	14,201	0.03	51	0.00	14,150	0.03
Oromo	17,080,318	32.15	1,629,735	22.28	15,450,583	33.72
Werji	20,536	0.04	13,188	0.18	7,348	0.02
Oyda	14,075	0.03	440	0.01	13,635	0.03
Saho	23,275	0.04	1,866	0.03	21,409	0.05
Sheko	23,785	0.04	341	0.00	23,444	0.05
Shinasha	32,698	0.06	3,826	0.05	28,872	0.06
Shita	307	0.00	41	0.00	266	0.00
Sidama	1,842,314	3.47	37,660	0.51	1,804,654	3.94
Somalie	3,160,540	5.95	420,146	5.74	2,740,394	5.98
Suri	19,632	0.04	56	0.00	19,576	0.04
Tigraway	3,284,568	6.18	688,849	9.42	2,595,719	5.67
Tsamay	9,702	0.02	319	0.00	9,383	0.02

Ethnic group	Urban and rural		Urban		Rural	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Welaita	1,269,216	2.39	128,516	1.76	1,140,700	2.49
Dorzie	28,990	0.05	26,021	0.36	2,969	0.01
Gamo	719,847	1.35	57,692	0.79	662,155	1.45
Goffa	241,530	0.45	16,967	0.23	224,563	0.49
Konta	49,627	0.09	2,448	0.03	47,179	0.10
Kulo	331,483	0.62	26,544	0.36	304,939	0.67
Mello	20,189	0.04	1,706	0.02	18,483	0.04
Weyito	1,631	0.00	463	0.01	1,168	0.00
Yemsa	165,184	0.31	10,475	0.14	154,709	0.34
Zeyisie	10,842	0.02	538	0.01	10,304	0.02
Zergula	390	0.00	78	0.00	312	0.00
Other ethnic national groups	107,073	0.20	11,160	0.15	95,913	0.21
From different parents	26,770	0.05	20,562	0.28	6,208	0.01
Eritreans	61,857	0.12	36,928	0.50	24,929	0.05
Djebutians	367	0.00	357	0.00	10	0.00
Somalians	24,726	0.05	20,090	0.27	4,636	0.01
Kenyans	134	0.00	101	0.00	33	0.00
Sudanese	2,035	0.00	1,661	0.02	374	0.00
Other foreigners	16,302	0.03	14,883	0.20	1,419	0.00
Not stated	5,827	0.01	2,688	0.04	3,139	0.01

Source: Central Statistical Authority of Ethiopia (1994).

Note: This is the most recent year for which data are available.