

Foreign Languages in Ethiopia: History and current status

Berhane Gerencheal *

Lecturer at Aksum University, Tigray, Ethiopia; MA in ELT, Ph.D Scholar at KIIT Deemed University

Bhubaneswar, India Deepanjali Mishra**

Ph.D, Professor in the School of Humanities, KIIT Deemed University

Bhubaneswar, India

Abstract

The beginning of the modern education and the introduction of the foreign languages in Ethiopia are the two faces of a single coin. And this paper mainly shows how and when foreign languages are introduced into Ethiopia following the footsteps of the introduction and expansion of modern education. It is done using secondary sources. It also gives brief explanations on the statuses and the roles of those foreign languages during different times starting from their introduction up to present. The absence of well-documented literature on this topic motivates the author to work on it. It is true that this topic is shallowly discussed whenever researchers have been reviewing the introduction and expansion of modern education into Ethiopia. The topic has been investigated as a minor agenda whenever researchers have been reviewing the education policies of Ethiopia as their major task. However, this research has reversed the common trend by giving due attention to the foreign languages. Hence, this paper could be used as a useful source document for any interested researchers who really want to study on it since no or less organized literature is available. On this review, English language is given more focus since it is the dominant language comparing to the other foreign languages which have been introduced to Ethiopia.

Keywords: Foreign Languages, English as a Foreign Language, French, Italia, Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Ethiopia, which is Africa's oldest independent country, is found in the horn of Africa. Regardless of its ancient civilization, Ethiopia is currently considered among the least developed nations in the world based on its economic development and living standards of its people. According to The World Bank report, the total population size of the nation was 104,957,438 in 2017; the life expectancy of the nation was 64.475 in 2016, and its GDP was 80.561 Billion USD in 2017(The World Bank, 2018a). The World Bank also stated that Ethiopia is one among the fastest economic growing nations in the world with double-digit growth for the last ten consecutive years. (The World Bank, 2018b) Apart from a five-year occupation by Mussolini's Italy, it has never been colonised. Among the sub-Saharan, Ethiopia is the only country which has had its own written language for many years starting from the Axumite civilization.

In Ethiopia, even the traditional education has been practiced for a long period of time mainly by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the modern education has a short history which was started in the early 20th Century after the Menelik II School, the first modern school, was officially opened in 1908 at Addis Ababa by Emperor Menelik II. The beginning of this modern education is believed as the major factor which allows the introduction and expansion of foreign (mainly European) languages in Ethiopia. Starting from this time, the education system of the nation has been shown many changes following the major political and ideological changes of the nation. And those political and ideological changes have had an impact on education policy, curricula, medium of instruction, and roles and statuses of foreign languages. Even though Ethiopia was not

colonised, African Colonization had also an impact on the overall Ethiopian education system. Tekeste, in his recent book, stated that "...the education system that the Ethiopian government implemented was very similar to those that prevailed in African states that were colonised for longer periods"(Negash, 2006, p. 7).

In Ethiopia, therefore, the education system can be divided into five periods: the pre-Italian period (1900-1935), during the Italian period (1935-1941), the post-Italian period (1941-1974), the Derg Regime period (1974-1991), and the EPRDF period (1991-present). Those five categories are proposed based on the major political and ideological changes on the education system in general and the roles and statuses of the foreign languages in Ethiopia in particular. For instance, the Education system in the Pre-Italian period was dominated by the French language; the Italian period was dominated by the Italy language, and the third period was mainly characterised by the English language domination. And the education systems of the fourth and the fifth periods have also been operated mainly by the English language.

2. The History of Foreign Languages in Ethiopia

The expansion of foreign languages in modern Ethiopia is highly connected with the introduction and expansion of modern Education in the nation. With regard to the education system, Ethiopia has two major traditions: 'traditional' and 'western' systems (Hoot, Szente, & Mebratu, 2004, p. 3). Even though western (modern) educational ideas have come into existence since the early 20th century, according to the above-mentioned scholars, the traditional education, which has been chiefly exercised by the Orthodox Church, has been there throughout the history of this ancient nation. So, in this paper, the introductions and the early expansions of various foreign languages to Ethiopia will be chronologically reviewed starting from the beginning of modern Education in the early 20th Century up to present.

2.1 Pre-Italian Occupation (1900s-1935)

The initial stage was mainly found between the establishments of modern school up to the invasion of fascist Italy. During this time, especially 1908 to 1935, the objective of education was mainly to create proficient citizens in different languages such as French, Geez, Italian, Arabic and Amharic (Bishaw & Lasser, 2012). Therefore, at this time, education was mainly emphasized in language teaching(Pankhurst, 1974). And, the selection and organization content of the syllabus were determined by the education experts from France, and French was used as a medium of instruction up to 1935(Bishaw & Lasser, 2012; Leyew, 2012). Apart from the government schools, soon after, (Leyew, 2012, p. 7) stated that "Foreign-based missionary schools started to flourish and were able to use other foreign languages such as English, German, Swedish, Italian." So, during this time one can safely conclude that education was mainly given for mastering foreign language mainly for the French language, and this choice was made because Ethiopia had good relationships with the French government in the political and economic diplomacy.

2.2 During-Italian Occupation (1935-1941)

During the fascist Italian government five years occupation in Ethiopia, everything was completely changed. By this time, schools were either closed or used for military camps (Negash, 2006). During this time, there was a complete change from the French language domination into the Italian language domination. According to Bishaw & Lasser (2012, p. 57), "all instructions in government-operated schools were primarily in Italy". The schools owned by the Catholic Mission, which emphasized religion, were also teaching the Italian language and culture.

It is clear that the bilateral relationships among Ethiopian and French governments led to the acceptance of French language, but the Italian language was imposed on Ethiopian government schools as a primary

medium of instruction and a language for teaching materials preparations following the five years invasion of the fascist Italian government. Unlike the French language, therefore, the Italian language did not stay for a long period of time in the Ethiopian educational contexts. It ceased with the withdrawal of the Mussolini's invaders from Ethiopia in 1941 and replaced by the English immediately.

2.3 Post-Italian Occupation (1941-1974)

Up to 1941, as you can see from the above, French and Italian languages were the most dominant foreign languages which were taught as courses and used as a medium of instructions in the Ethiopia education system. Starting from period, however, the English language has become the dominant foreign language in Ethiopia. And it is evident that the role of this language was insignificant in the Ethiopian context in the previous two consecutive periods. This period is generally known as the golden age for education for many reasons. One thing the expansion of schools in different parts of the nation was rapidly witnessed. The other thing the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts was established during this period for the first time. Furthermore, formal curriculum was also published and continuously revised to customise into the local contexts during this period especially starting from 1947. This period was mainly characterized by the British domination and then later by the American dominations.

During the Italian occupation, Emperor Haile Selassie I, the then Ethiopian king of kings, went in exile to Britain to get support from the international community including League of Nations to condemn the aggressor. And significant support was received from the Britain government in expelling the Fascist Italian government. Following this support, the Ethiopian government created a new chapter of friendship with Britain, and the overall education system of Ethiopia was influenced by Britain until the mid 1950s (Addo & Anteneh, 2006; Bishaw & Lasser, 2012; Kahsay, 2016; Leyew, 2012; Teka, 2009). Hence, the roles and the statuses of the French language in the Ethiopian context were replaced by the English language. As a result, its status increased from almost zero into hero. In line with this, Bishaw & Lasser (2012, p. 57) stated that the Ethiopian Education system was highly influenced by the British advisors.

Starting from the mid 1950s, the British influence in the education system of Ethiopia was increasingly declined since the British education advisors were replaced by Americans. Following the general agreement made for the technical cooperation between the governments of Ethiopia and United States in the 1960s, therefore, the domination of Americans was increased. According to Bishaw & Lasser (2012) this time, mainly from 1965 onward, was the period of American domination.

In conclusion, immediately after liberation of Ethiopia, English has become the only medium of instruction in the public schools even though the onset grade levels have been varied following the continuous curriculum revisions. For instance, initially, it was used as a medium of instruction starting from grade three, then after some years, 1943 to 1963, it was also started on grade four. Starting from the mid 1960s, the role of the English language as a medium of instruction was started from grade seven onward. However, through all the above times, it was offered as a course starting from grade one.

In spite of the shift from Britain into American dominations and the variation on the onset of grade levels in using English as a medium of instruction, English language was the dominant foreign language in the education system. With this regard, Leyew (2012, p. 15) clearly stated, during this period, "Amharic from local languages and English from foreign languages were favored."

2.4 The Derg Regime (1974-1991)

During this period, due to the fact that there had been political instability in the country since the end of the imperial administration, the proficient expatriate English teachers (Americans and Indians) were going back to their own countries. In addition to this, highly educated Ethiopians were killed by the Red Terror genocidal campaign of that military regime, and the luckiest ones exiled their home in opposition to the regime. The education coverage was also getting increased. Due to those reasons, the government was forced to recruit teachers with low English proficiency to narrow the gap between the demand and supply of English teachers. By 1980, the government also proposed to replace Amharic with English as a medium of instruction for junior high school levels (grade 7 & 8) even though this idea was confronted by the Evaluation Committee in 1983. And it is believed that the aforementioned reasons were the main contributing factors for the deterioration of English language proficiency among teachers and students (Negash, 2006).

According to Negash, in 1990, the role of English was ceased to be the language of instruction even though it remained as the language of textbooks for all subjects from grade six onwards: junior and senior secondary schools and higher education institutions.

Based on the above justifications, one might conclude that the quality of English language provision and the students' proficiency were deteriorating continuously starting from the coming of the military junta in the 1970s. In connection to this failure, even though many specific reasons could be mentioned, the potential cause was the civil war which was being existed in the nation for nearly two decades. Following this bloody war, the most experienced and proficient (expatriate) English teachers fled the country fearing the war. And the educated citizens were also killed or migrated to the four corners of the nation. And the government was also expanding the education massively for its political instrument. All those reasons contributed shortage of experienced teachers in general and proficient English teachers in particular all over the nation. To fill this gap, less proficient ones were employed. The English language remains as the language textbooks (especially starting from the junior high school onwards), but the teachers were using the vernacular (mainly Amharic) language in the class. Finally, the teachers and the curriculum of that time produced less qualified graduates in general and low proficient English teachers in general. That is why the notable Professor Tekeste Negash in his recent publication clearly stated that the quality of education including English language proficiency was deteriorated starting from the Derg regime (Negash, 2006)

2.5 The Current Status and Role of English in Ethiopia (1991-present)

In this globalized world, nowadays there is higher interconnectedness of people from all corners of the world than ever before. To facilitate this scenario, the role of the English language is indispensable since English has been the most successfully expanded language. Most scholars agree that English has been number one expanded language all over the world. This fact is well explained by Cha which reads:

If the Babylonian builders who were scattered over the face of the Earth by God for their arrogant attempt to build a tower that would reach to heaven could get together today, they would perhaps be able to continue their work without having any problems in understanding each other. A quite unexpected challenge to God's work is now being made by the English language. The diversity of human languages, one of the major barriers to reuniting innumerable ethno-linguistic groups for thousands of years, is about to be overcome by the rapid spread of English all over the world (Cha, 2007).

It is, therefore, safe to generalize that English has recently become the most commonly used international language worldwide (Cha, 2007; Crystal, 2004, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2005) The case of Ethiopia is also not out of this trend; the government and many peoples of the nation commonly consider English as a gateway to the rest of the world, opening up access to better jobs and opportunities to travel. Additionally, being fluent in

English and speaking this language is nowadays seen as better social prestige. At the state level, there are also rationales why one might desire Ethiopians to be able to speak English. Having mastered the global language could improve business prospects and help the country to be more economically competitive at the international level.

Nowadays, the overall status of the English language is also becoming increasingly popular in different contexts: education, commerce, research, publication, governmental-, and non-governmental organizations. The current education and training policy of the nations reads that “English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education” (FDRGE, 1994, p. 24). This document also clearly states English as a course should be given starting from grade one across the nation. Later, English is also recommended to be given starting from KG mainly focusing on the development of the basic communication skills among the children (FDRE MoE, 2009).

Even though the current Education and Training Policy clearly proposes the English language as a medium of instruction for secondary and tertiary levels as compulsory, “most regions start using English as a medium of instruction from Grade 7, and very few regions from Grade 5” (FDRE MoE, 2009). For instance, while Tigray- and Oromia National Regional States start the English language as a medium of instruction from grade nine, Addis Ababa city and Amhara National Regional State commence it from grade seven. And SNNP Regional State also begins it from grade five because, in some areas of this regional state, it is common practice to find a lot of students who belong to various linguistic backgrounds in the same classroom. So English is preferred to address the linguistic diversity of the students.

In addition to the education sector, the application of English together with local or federal working languages is becoming common. For example, different research centres are currently using English as their medium of publication. Various business institutions and governmental organizations like insurance companies, banks, and telecommunications are also using English as their medium of communication, especially in their written communications, next to Amharic which is the official working language of the federal government. For instance, the website of various organizations like the homepage of Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Ethio-Telecom, Ethiopian Airlines, private real estates, House of Federation, House of Peoples’ Representative, all Universities (both public & private), and different high level federal and regional government offices are designed mainly either using English as a sole language or Amharic as an alternative language of browsing to English.

Most surprisingly, the demands to possess better English proficiency by everyone seem high. And any person who speaks English or at least mixes English while using local language is perceived as a modern or educated man/woman. This trend shows the popularity of English in Ethiopia; it is currently perceived as a language of elites.

In contrast to the aforementioned demand, it is evident that most students at schools and universities or professionals in various industries have very low English fluency. Research findings, even though they are few, have consistently shown that most Ethiopian students are anxious while using English in the classroom. For instance, two-thirds (65.9%) of high school students were suffering from moderate up to high levels of foreign language anxiety, i.e. English language in this case (Firew, 2008). Moreover, in his study at third-year English major Ethiopian university students, Gerencheal (2016) also found that nearly two-thirds (64.1%) of the students were found anxious.

Since most students have shown English language anxiety ranging from moderate to high, by implication we can understand that most students have low English proficiency levels since foreign language anxiety has

consistently shown negative moderate correlation with language achievement including proficiency (Aida, 1994; Gerencheal, 2016; E. Horwitz, 2001; E. K. Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). In relation to this conclusion drawn from the literature, Amlaku clearly stated "...the [Ethiopian] learners' proficiency remains always poor and the effectiveness of English language teaching remains always questionable despite the efforts being undertaken the Ethiopian government and concerned institutions (Amlaku, 2010, p. 10)"

The proficiency level of the EFL teachers is not much different from the students' case. Baye Yimam (2000E.C), a famous Professor in Linguistics at Addis Ababa University, stated that "employers frequently complained that graduate students at all levels lack the skills to prepare ordinary reports and are unable to formulate their thoughts and express them using correct sentences" Cited in (Kahsay, 2016, p. 229). Departments, schools, institutions, colleges of various Ethiopian universities are supposed to use English while they produce materials, hold academic meetings, write minutes, and reports, but most of them are using Amharic especially to conduct meetings and write letters and announcements. In some Ethiopian universities, it is common practice to see, some English departments themselves hold their meeting using Amharic, and later they prepare the minute of the meeting using English. This shows the extent to which many academic staffs are not comfortable to express their ideas using the English language because they might have low proficiency.

The main reason behind this deficiency could be due to the status of English in the country; it is categorized as a foreign language. Students do not have an adequate amount of English exposures out of the classrooms. Neither English speaking communities nor working places are sufficiently available out of the classrooms except embassies and few international institutions where the students do not have day-to-day access to those places. No doubt the opportunities that students have to really work on their English outside of school hours could have a lot to do with the mastering of the language. However, this is the missed chance in Ethiopia. Hence, in Ethiopia, the EFL classroom environment is very much different from a natural ESL context (Teka, 2009)

Moreover, all most all the teachers are local teachers who were taught the language as a foreign language by the local teachers as well. Kahsay (2016) interestingly discussed that, in Ethiopia, most students are taught English by Ethiopian teachers who studied it as a foreign language from their teachers who studied English as a foreign language. This vicious circle has been continuing since the 1970s (Kahsay, 2016; Negash, 2006). For the last forty years, the education policies have mainly focused on the expansion, not on the quality. So, to alleviate the demand, the governments have mainly been rushing to provide large numbers of college- and university graduates to the job market. By doing so, the English language proficiency is highly compromised. A good example for this is that universities and colleges have started assigning students forcefully to this field of study since most students do not want to join English department at their first or second choices. They perceive that English language is a difficult field of study both to learn and to teach it despite their wish to have good command on it.

Part of this writing, it is important to mention some of my observations. Private school students, who mostly come from middle class or upper-class families, seem to possess better proficiency in English compared to their government school counterparts. The reason behind this discrepancy is that private schools (mainly primary and secondary levels) have better access to English language books, practice materials, and internet connections, which make them to practice the language skills outside of the class. However, this does not mean that government-school students are totally shut out from joining higher education or unable to master English. Because, any student has the potential to reach academic excellence through hard work, but it does mean that some students will have to work significantly harder if they want to succeed at university, where all lectures assumed to be given in English.

As my experience in teaching EFL at University level for more than a decade, the above-mentioned discrepancy is clearly observed. Even though the students who come from cities, particularly from private schools, seem to have better proficiency in English compared to their counterparts that come from rural areas and government schools, the overall Ethiopian English proficiency is very low. University students who are doing English activities in the classroom usually want to use the local languages. When university EFL students are asked to give answers, they are highly embarrassed. Most of them are also uncomfortable when they are asked to make oral presentation in front of their classmate or any other gathered people. They often sweat their hands, vibrate their sound, and stammer despite the fact the role of the language is assumed as the most important.

3. Conclusion

At the early stage of the modern education, among the very few ultimate purposes of the education, the government aspired to make its citizens proficient in different foreign languages. Following this vision, several foreign languages were incorporated in the curriculum of the Ethiopian education system. French, Italy, Arabic, and English were the dominant ones. The statuses and the roles of those foreign languages have been varied based on the political and ideological differences of the rulers in the nation. Of all the foreign languages, English is the most favoured language after French and Italy, and it is still the most popular foreign language in Ethiopia.

Despite the expansion and demand of English in Ethiopia and its position as a medium of instruction in educational system, the role of English is not clearly mentioned either in the federal constitution or in the regional ones. Regardless of this fact, the federal constitution is written both in Amharic and English language, but it [the constitution] states that the Amharic version shall have final legal authority in case of interpretation problem arises. On the other hand, one might argue that the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (1994) document has stated the role of English. However, the roles of English which are stated in this document are restricted only to the educational system. Last but not least, since the acceptance and the need for this language are becoming increased by Ethiopians, the government should clearly show the status and the role of English in its policy, and the EFL classroom contexts must reflect the real life situations.

References

- Addo, D., & Anteneh, G. (2006). Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends. *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Science*, 2:1. Jimma University.
- Aida, Y. (1994). Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's Construct of Foreign Language Anxiety: The Case of Students of Japanese. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(2), 155. doi:10.2307/329005
- Amlaku, B. (2010). Language Policies and the Role of English in Ethiopia (p. 15). Presented at the IATEFL BESIG, (19-21 Nov. 2010), Bielefeld, Germany.
- Bishaw, A., & Lasser, J. (2012). *African Nebula*, Issue 5, 2012, (5), 17.
- Cha, Y.-K. (2007). The Spread of English Language Instruction in the Primary School. In A. Benavot, C. Braslavsky, & N. Truong (Eds.), *School Knowledge in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Vol. 18, pp. 55–71). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. doi:10.1007/978-1-4020-5736-6_4

Crystal, D. (2004). *The language Revolution by crystal*. Polity Press Ltd: USA.

Crystal, D. (2012). *English as a global language*. Cambridge university press.

FDRE MoE. (2009). Curriculum Framework for Ethiopian Education (KG – Grade 12). Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.et/policies-and-strategies/-/asset_publisher

FDRGE. (1994). EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICY. St. George Printing Press. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.et/policies-and-strategies/-/asset_publisher

Firew, M. (2008). *A Study of High School Students English Learning Anxiety and English Achievement: With Particular Reference to Grade 11 at Dembecha Preparatory School, in West Gojjam* (MA Thesis). Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa. Retrieved from <http://etd.aau.edu.et/handle/123456789/8226?show=full>.

Gerencheal, B. (2016). Gender Differences in Foreign Language Anxiety at an Ethiopian University: Mizan-Tepi University Third Year English Major Students in Focus, *I*(1), 1–16.

Hoot, J. L., Szente, J., & Mebratu, B. (2004). Early education in Ethiopia: Progress and prospects. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *32*(1), 3–8.

Horwitz, E. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *21*.
doi:10.1017/S0267190501000071

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, *70*(2), 125. doi:10.2307/327317

Kahsay, T. (2016). *Proposed Language Reform for Ethiopia*. Three Qua Publishing. Retrieved from <http://aigaforum.com/article2017/Preview-from-Proposed-Language-Reform-for-Ethiopia.pdf>

Leyew, Z. (2012). The Ethiopian Language Policy: A Historical and Typological Overview. *Ethiopian Journal of Languages and Literature*, *12*(2), 1–59.

Negash, T. (2006). *Education in Ethiopia: From crisis to the brink of collapse*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Pankhurst, R. (1974). Education Language and History: An Historical Background to Post-War Ethiopia. *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, *7*(1), 75–97.

Seidlhofer, B. (2005). English as a lingua franca. *ELT Journal*, *59*(4), 339–341.

Teka, M. (2009). *Evaluatioin of Implementation of the ‘Paradigm Shift’ in EFL Teacher Education in*

Ethiopia (PhD Thesis). Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa.

The World Bank. (2018a). Ethiopia | Data. Retrieved 7 December 2018, from

<https://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia>

The World Bank. (2018b). Ethiopia Overview. Retrieved 7 December 2018, from

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview>