



## **THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION, THE SELECTION OF LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND THE PLACE OF AFAN OROMO IN ETHIOPIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

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### **Abstract**

*The issue of education raises the role of language in the educational process. This is because it is through language that education gets life and it is through education that language develops. In other words, in talking about education, it is inevitable that the question of language should be arise, since it is mainly through language that knowledge is shared. Besides, it is said that the language of instruction is at the heart of any learning process, since effective teaching and learning depend on clear and understandable communication. In connection to this, it is argued that the selection of an appropriate medium of instruction is one of the most significant factors that contribute to the effectiveness of any educational system. However, selecting the language of instruction appears to be problematic and difficult. The main purposes of this article are to describe the role of language in education and to assess how the language of instruction is selected in monolingual and multilingual contexts. It will also explore the selection of language of instruction in Ethiopian context and the place of Afan Oromo in Ethiopian Education System.*

**Key Words:** *Afan Oromo, Education, Ethiopia, Learning, Language of Instruction, Mother Tongue*

### **1. Role of Language in Education**

Education is defined as “the development of all those capacities in the individual which will enable him to control his environment and fulfill his responsibilities” (Dewey cited in Aggarwal, 1996: 6). It is also considered as the process of development in which abilities of each individual are brought out and practiced to generate useful behaviors (Derebsa, 2006). TGE (1994) also stated that education enables individuals and society to make all rounded participation in the development process by acquiring necessary knowledge, ability, skills and attitudes. In the contemporary society, education is expected to support the social and economic development of a country (Shimelis, 2006). With regard to this, education plays significant role in producing the human force that would be responsible for rapid economic growth.

Getting the benefits of education and making education more effective require the consideration of different issues of which language is the core. Heugh, et.al. (2007:4) stated that “We are convinced that the role of language in education is one of the most important issues, which affect upon education and development in African countries.” Hence, the issue of education raises the role of language in the educational process. This is because it is through language that education gets life and it is through education that language develops (Bamgbose, 1991). In other words, in talking about education, it is inevitable that the question of language should be arise, since it is mainly through language that knowledge is shared. In addition, it is said that the language of instruction is at the heart of any learning



process, since effective teaching and learning depend on clear and understandable communication (UNESCO, 2003).

Language of instruction (henceforth LOI) refers to the use of a language as a medium of instruction (hereafter MOI) or its teaching as a subject (Alidou et al., 2006). For this reason, attention is given to the selection of an appropriate LOI. In connection to this, Mekonnen (2009) argued that selection of an appropriate LOI is one of the most significant factors that contribute to the effectiveness of any educational system. Besides, UNESCO (2003) stated that since effective teaching depends on clear and understandable communication, the language of instruction is at the heart of any learning process. Students' mother tongue (henceforth MT) should assume major roles in education to provide effective instruction.

The use of MT in education has been the concern of different international organizations and agencies. One of which is UNESCO. UNESCO (1953, 2003) strongly argues that using the students' native languages as LOI is a decisive factor for effective learning. With this regard, Kioko, et al., (2008:6) said "UNESCO and other international education agencies speak strongly of the pedagogical imperative of using a child's own language as the medium of instruction ---." To put into practice the argument for the use of MT, UNESCO passed the earliest decision on the use of MT in education. After the meeting of educational experts in 1951, UNESCO recommended that:

*On educational grounds, we recommend that the use of the mother tongue to be extended to a late stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible ( 1953: 47-48).*

UNESCO strongly argues that using the native language of students as LOI in education provides students pedagogical and other importances. The recommendation highly influenced the practice of language use in education and led to different experiments in different countries of the world (Bamgbose, 1991). Various literature claimed that the use of students native language as a LOI are decisive factors to effective learning (see Bamgbose, 1991: Gfeller, 1999: McNab, 1989: Mekonnen, 2009: UNESCO, 2003, Teshome, 2007: Romaine, 2000). From the foregoing discussion and evidences, it is possible to say that language play a pivotal role in education. Below the advantages of using students' MT as a LOI is briefly explained.

## **2. The Advantages of Using Students' Mother Tongue as a Language of Instruction**

The use of MT as a LOI offers ample advantages for the learners. For example, Kioko, et al., (2008) stated that MT provides pedagogical advantage to learners in that MT eases the learning of students and enhances the child's chances of success in formal education. It also provides linguistic benefits to learners in that MT provides learners with the opportunity to start school in the language they are most at ease with. That is, the use of the learner's first language in school promotes a smooth transition between home and school. This creates an emotional stability which translates to cognitive stability. Besides, it is said that education should be accessible to students through their own languages as it provides them psychological advantage (Gfeller, 1999: Teshome, 2007).



The use of MT as a LOI also facilitates second language development, student learning, encourage local teachers and family involvement Kioko, et.al (2008). According to Gfeller(1999), most children understand their local language best. The school can build on what the children have learnt in their family and society. This makes students to actively participate in the lesson as they are not hindered by lack of language. This in turn allows healthy cognitive development. Furthermore, better expression of cultures (Shimelis, 2006) and better contextualization of education (Gfeller, 1999) are the other reasons why MT should be used in education.

In general, learning with MT is effective in transmitting social and cultural value, developing, improving students' achievements and enhancing foreign language acquisition (Teshome, 2007). Studies conducted in different parts of the world (Ex. Gemechu, 2010; Gfeller, 1999; Kioko, et al., 2008; Shimelis, 2006; Teshome, 2007; UNESCO, 2003, etc) become evident for the above arguments and necessities the use of the students' MT as a LOI.

For example, Teshome(2007) conducted a study in Ethiopia on the impact of learning with the mother tongue on academic achievements and found out that students who studied Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics and Physics in grade 8 with their mother tongue achieve high score than those who studied the same subject in the non-mother tongue. The findings of the study also indicate that learning in the MT itself and the MT itself as a subject facilitate learning of a Foreign Language(FL) more than learning in the FL and the FL itself as a subject. In addition, Mekonnen (2009) conducted research and concluded that the use of MTs in education is an objective advantage for students' performance, while the use of a FL is an objective disadvantage for students' performance. Furthermore, Kioko, et. al(2008:6)said that "The evidence is clear at using African language of instruction in schools yields positive cognitive and academic outcomes for students as well as positive social outcomes for multilingual communities." For this reason, mother tongue based instruction is crucial to provide students with effective education.

Using the above findings as evidence, it can be argued that in multilingual society, education should be designed and offered by using the languages available in society. According to Kioko, et al(2008:6) "what has clear is that pedagogically, politically and socially, multilingual education has a great deal to recommend it" Thus, the use of MT as a LOI enable learners to get the aforementioned advantages. As a result, MT is recommended to be used as a LOI. However, the recommendation may not be practical and it is observed that FL is used as a LOI.

### **3. The Disadvantages of Using Foreign Language as Language of Instruction**

The failure to give a significant role to the students' native languages and dependence on using foreign languages as a LOI is argued to have various difficulties for students as the following evidences depict. The use of a foreign language as LOI becomes double learning to students. That is, students do not only learn the subject matter but also the language itself (Teshome, 2007). The use a language which is foreign to students also creates difficult to students to express themselves and limit their classroom participation as there is fear of making mistakes (Kioko et al., 2008).

Besides, the use foreign language as a LOI brings a barrier to smooth classroom communication (Mekonnen, 2009). Mekonnen further argued that the use of a foreign language in education negatively affects the ability and the ease with which knowledge is acquired by students. It also affects the performance of students' and creates difficulties in developing their cognitive skills (McNab, 1989). Moreover, Gemechu (2010) stated that giving low status to African Languages in educational setting



leads to marginalization of majority of the citizens from active engagement in the development arena. The above evidences shows that using the language which is less familiar or foreign to learners in education affects students in many ways.

Therefore, to help learners get the benefits of learning in the native languages and to overcome the problems of learning in foreign languages, education should be accessible to students through their own native languages. However, the selection of a LOI is not always simple and straightforward in multilingual societies as the following discussion shows. The next section will describe the selection of LOI in monolingual and multilingual contexts.

#### **4. Selection of Language of Instruction (LOI) in Monolingual and Multilingual Contexts**

Mekonnen (2009) argued that the selection of an appropriate LOI is one of the most significant factors that contribute to the effectiveness of any educational system. The selection of LOI can be simple or complex depending on the number of the languages used in a society. For instance, the selection of the LOI seems straightforward in a monolingual society, where there are no competing languages (Mesthrie and Leap, 2009). In such a society, the decision makers can select the society's language for education.

In multilingual society selecting language of instruction for the different levels education is practically complex and difficult (Bamgbose, 1991). This is because deciding the LOI largely depends on different factors such as historical, economical, pedagogical, sociolinguistic, cultural, theoretical or political (UNESCO, 2003). McNab (1989) stated that language situation, sociopolitical history and overall educational objectives are the three aspects of national environment that have major influence on language of education. In Africa, such issue is determined by the past colonial influence as many of African countries favored and adopted the language of their former colonial power and continued with their previous practice. For example, most countries of West Africa opted the use of Western languages (i.e. English and French) for official purpose (Gfeller, 1999).

In addition, language situation and historical experience of colonialism have a major impact on language policies for education in Sub-Saharan Africa (McNab, 1989). In connection to this, Bamgbose (1991:69) stated "while it would seem that African nations make policy in education, what they actually do is carry out on the logic of the policy of the past". This shows that LOI is selected according to the previous colonial experience. Further, McNab (1989:17) described the language policies for education in Sub-Saharan Africa by saying "*Although there has been a great deal of support to the idea of mother tongue education in Sub-Saharan Africa, analyses of language policies for education in the Sub-Saharan Africa region show that only about half of the countries in the region make any use of African language as media of instruction in the formal education system.*" Thus, it is common to observe in some Africa countries that the language of education is mostly Western languages. This shows that how the history of the countries affects the selection of LOI.

Generally, the selection of LOI is simple and straightforward in monolingual country. However, in multilingual society, selecting LOI for the different levels education is practically complex and difficult (Bamgbose, 1991). Next, the selection of LOI in Ethiopia context and the place of Afan Oromo in Ethiopian Educational Systems is briefly described.





## **5. Selection of Language of Instruction (LOI) in Ethiopia Context and the Place of Afan Oromo in Ethiopian Educational Systems**

In Ethiopia, the language situation, sociopolitical history and objectives of education have major influence on the selection of LOI (McNab, 1989). In the past regimes (of Ethiopia), LOI used to be selected in accordance with the needs and political interests of the leaders. This is because, to achieve the political interests, education was used as a main instrument. This implies the fact that educational objectives were designed based on political judgments of how best to achieve the wider national goals. For instance, centralization, integration and modernization were the major goals of the imperial government. Formal schools were key areas where political integration was accomplished (Markakis, cited in McNab, 1989). Language policy for education is, thus, a product of the interaction between national interests and objectives as expressed in educational objectives, sociopolitical history and the language situation of the country.

Like much of African countries, in Ethiopia LOI was also characterized by the denial of local languages from education and other formal purposes. Though the provision of modern education was started before a century, the use of mother tongues (MTs) for education was not given attention. The previous governments of Ethiopia declared Amharic to be the only official language and LOI, although there were above 80 languages in the country. In the past, it was believed that one national language was necessary to keep the unity of a country (Gfeller, 1999). On the other hand, linguistic pluralism was viewed as a danger to national unity (Smith, 2008).

But, different scholars (Bamgbose, 1991; Kioko et al., 2008; Romaine, 2000), illustrated that linguistic diversity does not cause national disintegration and/or linguistic uniformity does not keep the unity of a country. In spite of this fact, the previous governments of Ethiopia declared Amharic to be the only official language and LOI (Feyisa, 1996). This kind of policy forced the other languages in Ethiopia to be ignored and lost any recognition (Shimelis, 2006).

Consequently, the other languages of Ethiopia were rejected from a medium of instruction and governmental works. Using mainly Amharic for education has hindered the development of the other languages and created contempt for speakers of the other languages. Unless the educational setting supports multilingual education, the different languages of the society do not have a chance to grow and develop (Garcia, 1997). Shimelis (2006) stated that the educational policies of different systems of Ethiopian governments failed to address the various linguistic and cultural diversity of the country.

For example, Afan Oromo was one among the diverse languages of Ethiopia which were not used for instruction. Afan Oromo, Oromo Language, is an Afro-Asiatic language, and the most widely spoken of the Cushitic family. It is one of the major indigenous African languages that is widely spoken and used in most parts of Ethiopia and some parts of the neighboring countries (Mekuria, 1994). Afan Oromo is spoken by 40 percent of Ethiopian population (Kebede, 2009). In Ethiopia, Afan Oromo is spoken as a lingua franca by other people who are in contact with Oromo people. According to Mekuria (1994) and Feyisa (1996), Afan Oromo is used by different nationalities such as Harari, Sidama, Anuak, Gurage, Amhara, Koma, Kulo and Kaficho as a means of communication and trade with their neighboring Oromo people. In connection to this, Amanuel and Samuel (2012:32) stated that "It [Afan Oromo] is also used as a language of inter-group communication in several parts of Ethiopia."



Besides, outside Ethiopia, Afan Oromo is spoken in Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Tanzania (Tilahun, 1993). These make Afan Oromo one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa (Bender, 1976). Afan Oromo is spoken in a vast territory of Ethiopia ranging from Tigray in the North to the Central Kenya in the South, and from Wallagga in the West to Harar in the East. In these areas, it is spoken with several dialects (Ali and Zaborski, 1990).

Though Afan Oromo as Bender (1976), Feyisa (1996), (Kebede, 2009), Mekuria (1994) and etc. contends, is the most widely spoken language in Africa and serves as a lingua franca in Ethiopia, it had been abandoned from education, governmental works and media for more than a century (Bender, 1976). Publications and Radio transmission through the other language has been banned on. The past rulers of Ethiopia attempted to replace it by Amharic (Qajela, 1993). Using mainly Amharic for education has hindered the development of Afan Oromo and the other languages in Ethiopia. This is because unless an educational system supports a multilingual education, the different languages of the society do not have a chance to grow and develop (Garcia, 1997). The past governments of Ethiopia hindered the various Ethiopian linguistic groups not to learn their language and attend education through their own native language. Besides, the use of Amharic as a LOI severely affected the learning of Oromo and other students whose native language was not Amharic (Dereje, 2010). Thus, the past educational policies of Ethiopian regimes failed to address the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country.

For this reason, getting access to education and other services through one's own language was the concern of Oromo people and other ethnic groups for many years (Heugh et al., 2007). To address the concern, the Derg allowed the use of 15 native languages (such as Afan Oromo, Tigirigna, Wolayita, Sidama, Somali, etc.) for adult literacy program. But the languages were not given an opportunity to be used in formal schools and in other areas. Then, Amharic remained the sole language of instruction in Ethiopia. Hence, it can be said little attempts, if any, were made by the previous governments to address the concern of linguistic diversity in education.

In the history of Ethiopian formal education, the idea of providing education using the native language of students is first started by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). The FDRE followed a flexible official approach which takes into consideration the linguistic and cultural diversity of Ethiopian People (Gfeller, 1999). Unlike the former governments, linguistic diversity is currently considered as natural and viewed as the right of citizens and provided constitutional protection. In addition, linguistic diversity is viewed as a resource so that all the languages are treated equally and fostered and developed through education.

The new government tried to address the diversity in different spheres of life such as in political, social and educational setting. To address this linguistic diversity in education, the government declared that each region has the right to use its own language for instruction until the end of primary education (grades 8).

Besides, the FDRE designed Educational and Training Policy (ETP) in 1994, in which recognizing the right of nations and nationalities to learn in their respective languages is stipulated as one of the specific objectives. In addition, Ethiopian languages are given protection in the constitution of FDRE. For example, Article 5 of the constitution declares that all Ethiopian languages enjoy equal state of recognition. Article 39 also states that every people nation and nationality have the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language, as well as to express, to develop and to promote its culture and history.



Thus, the Educational Policy and the Constitution give the right of using native languages for the instructional purpose and in governmental offices at regional level.

After the FDRE declared and promoted the use of native languages for various official purposes, the regional states have chosen their respective official languages. Accordingly, Afan Oromo was chosen as the official language of Oromiya National Regional State. Currently, Afan Oromo has different official functions. For instance, Afan Oromo is a LOI in primary schools (both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycles), in teacher education colleges. It is also studied as a subject in secondary and preparatory schools (i.e., Grades 9-10 and 11-12 respectively). Besides, Afan Oromo is a field of specialization at tertiary education both at the 1<sup>st</sup> degree and 2<sup>nd</sup> degree levels.

As described Afan Oromo is begun to be used as the LOI before two decades. Afan Oromo, Though Afan Oromo as Bender (1976), Feyisa (1996), (Kebede, 2009), Mekuria (1994) and etc. contends, is the most widely spoken language in Africa and serves as a lingua franca in Ethiopia. Despite these facts, it is not yet used as Ethiopian Federal Government working language. The question to use Afan Oromo as a federal working language is remained unanswered. Different organizations and scholars have been asking for the use of the Afan Oromo in the institutions of the federal government. The language is spoken by almost half of Ethiopian population. That is, according to Kebede(2009), Afan Oromo is spoken by 40 percent of Ethiopian population. Around 10 million people speak Afan Oromo as their second language. In Ethiopia, Afan Oromo is spoken as a lingua franca by other people who are in contact with Oromo people. According to Mekuria (1994) and Feyisa (1996), Afan Oromo is used by different nationalities such as Harari, Sidama, Anuak, Gurage, Amhara, Koma, Kulo and Kaficho as a means of communication and trade with their neighboring Oromo people. In connection to this, Amanuel and Samuel (2012:32) stated that "It [Afan Oromo] is also used as a language of inter-group communication in several parts of Ethiopia." From these evidences it is logical to ask for the use of Afan Oromo as working Language of the Federal Government of Ethiopia.

## **Summary**

As revealed in the foregoing discussion, language of instruction is at the heart of any learning process, because effective teaching and learning depend on clear and understandable communication. For this reason, attention is given to the selection of an appropriate LOI. UNESCO (2003) strongly argues that using the students' native languages as a LOI is a decisive factor for effective learning. However, the selection of a LOI is not always simple and straightforward in multilingual societies. In a multilingual society, selecting the LOI for the different educational levels is practically complex and problematic (Bamgbose, 1991). This is because deciding the LOI largely depends on a variety of factors such as historical, economic, pedagogical, sociolinguistic, cultural, ideological, theoretical or/and political.

In Ethiopia, the language situation, sociopolitical history and objectives of education have major influence on the selection of LOI (McNab, 1989). In the past regimes, LOI used to be selected in accordance with the needs and political interests of the leaders. This is because, to achieve the political interests, education was used as a main instrument. This implies the fact that educational objectives were designed based on political judgments of how best to achieve the wider national goals.

Like many African countries, in past regimes the LOI in Ethiopia had been characterized by the denial of the students' native languages in education and other areas. Though the provision of modern education was started before a century, the use of mother tongues (MTs) for education was not given attention. The



previous governments of Ethiopia declared Amharic to be the only official language and LOI, although there were above 80 languages in the country. The incumbent government of Ethiopia, FDRE, first started the provision of education using the MTs of students. The FDRE followed a flexible official approach which takes into consideration the linguistic and cultural diversity of Ethiopian people (Gfeller, 1999). To address this linguistic diversity in education, the government declared that each region has the right to use its own language for instruction until the end of primary education (Grade 8). Accordingly, Afan Oromo was chosen as the official language of Oromiya National Regional State. Currently, Afan Oromo has different official functions in Oromiya Regional Government. However, the question to use Afan Oromo as a federal working language is remained unanswered.

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