Language Determination in Ethiopia: 
What Medium of Instruction?

Berhanu Bogale

The purpose of this study is to explore the existing models of language acquisition and learning in two regions in Ethiopia (Gambella and SNNPR) and determine which are more effective, in order to make evidenced-based recommendations for language education policy. A key concern is to identify which language/s should be used as medium of instruction (MOI) and at which level/s of the school system. We aimed to get a range of data through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations from both regions visited.

SECTION I: PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the existing models of language acquisition and learning in two regions in Ethiopia (Gambella and SNNPR) and determine which are more effective, in order to make evidenced-based recommendations for language education policy. A key concern is to identify which language/s should be used as medium of instruction (MOI) and at which level/s of the school system.

Languages are used in a wide range of contexts in Ethiopia. There are significantly large Ethiopian languages (Amharic, Oromifa, and Tigrinya) as well as numerous smaller languages. For historical reasons, Amharic plays a role as the sometimes contested yet functional lingua franca of the country. English is highly prized as a language which may offer access to higher education and international opportunity; however, it is foreign to most, and is known and used only by a small minority of educated economic and/or political elite. The practical diffusion of English in Ethiopia is limited to fewer functional domains than in many other African countries where the language enjoys similarly high status, aspirational value and use.

The current language education policy, which has been in place since 1994, accords high practical status to the mother tongue as medium of instruction, particularly at the primary level; transition to English at grades 5, 7, or 9 depending upon the region; and the learning of Amharic as a subject by speakers of languages other than Amharic. The policy for most students, therefore, is trilingual (also known as multilingual) based on the mother tongue, Amharic as a national language, and English as an international language. The findings of contemporary research support extended educational use of the mother tongue, and the addition of other languages through bi- or trilingual policies. This means that Ethiopian language education policy falls broadly within the parameters of “best policy” in terms of multilingual developing countries. However, as is the case in many other countries, implementation is not always aligned with actual policy. There

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are always special circumstances, attitudes and other impediments which need to be identified and dealt with in order for policy to work efficiently and get the best return on investment. One of these is clearly the issue of how English can be used effectively alongside Ethiopian languages to support good teaching and learning of the curriculum.

A main concern of the MoE at present is the practical implementation of a workable language policy which will support the equitable delivery of quality education to which all have access. The goal of quality education is to facilitate optimal cognitive development of the pupil through schooling (UNESCO 2005). Research demonstrates that there is a continuum of interrelated connections between language and cognition, moving from the development of ‘social language proficiency’ to ‘academic language proficiency’ and then to academic achievement (Gottlieb 2003, following Cummins 1984, 1992 etc.). It is essential to ensure that the language education policy and its implementation take students along this continuum.

SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW

English is more of a foreign language than a second language in Ethiopia. This is mainly because English is so infrequently used in daily life outside the classroom and students do not have the opportunity to learn the language informally. The designation of English as a “second official language” of the country is, thus, according to Stoddard, misleading. The role of English in Ethiopia, at least outside the educational system, resembles more closely that of countries where English is considered a foreign language (e.g. Sweden) than that of countries where it is considered a second language used relatively widely as a lingua franca (e.g. in some urban settings in Nigeria).

Thus the main way students have been expected to learn English has been by using it as a medium of instruction. Some scholars have questioned the extent to which students can be successful in using English as a medium. Based on his field surveys in the mid-1980s, Stoddart had the following to say about the English language ability of the vast majority of students in Ethiopia:

Students do not possess sufficient English even to understand what they hear from their teachers or read in their textbooks, let alone to participate actively through their own speaking and writing. … as a result of the inability of students to function through English, the quality of teaching and learning in schools has been very adversely affected. At best, it means that mere rote learning often prevails, with no critical and creative participation of students, and little enough of even simple comprehension by them of what they are being told. And at worst it means that some – possibly many – students whose English is not sufficient even for rote-learning spend most of their class hours copying down notes that the teacher has written on the blackboard, and transforming them in the process into complete nonsense. In such a situation it is no longer appropriate to call English a medium of instruction; rather it has become a medium of obstruction (Stoddart 1986: 6-7).

According to some researchers (e.g. Dendir 1981), the main reason for student failure in the secondary school is the inability to study through the medium of English and because of problems with English.

Many writers agree that there was a sharp decline in the standard of English of students and teachers in the 1970s and 1980s. Tekeste has summarized the effect of using English as a medium of instruction as follows:

[The use of English as a medium of instruction] from grade seven onwards has been extremely negative. The foreign medium has functioned as a barrier between
students and their relatives at home. The generation gap became even sharper because of the medium of instruction, which turned school children into more sophisticated and infallible “semi-gods.” Most of those who left school before 1974 believed themselves to be the unspoken leaders of Ethiopian society (Tekeste 1990:54).

Different writers suggested solutions for the English language problems observed before 1994, at which time the current Education and Training Policy was put into effect. According to Rogers (1969:26), “Ethiopian education may need a new hole started, a hole labelled ‘Don’t start teaching English until grade 7”’. Stoddart (1986:19) suggested “…replacing English as a medium and restricting its teaching as a subject”. Stoddart strongly advised the Ethiopian Government to “adopt a determined stance” in this direction. According to Stoddart, the government:

“…will have to ensure that students and parents fully realize that no one who is likely to need English later will be disadvantaged by the new policies. Indeed, a major aim of the proposed changes is to ensure that those who need English will attain higher levels of proficiency in it than they do at present. Perhaps one slogan might be ‘later English means better English’! Another might equally be ‘later English means better science, mathematics, geography, etc.)’ for continuing and non-continuing students alike” (Stoddart 1986:19).

Since the introduction of the new Education and Training Policy in 1994, English has been taught as a subject as of grade 1 in all regions, without exception. Apart from this, regional governments may determine their own policies on language of education in grades 1 to 8. Thus in some regions local languages are used as MOI in grades 7 and 8 (e.g. in Oromiya, Somali, and Tigray regions), in others English is still used as MOI for non-language subjects (e.g. Gambella, SNNPR), and yet in others English is partially used as MOI to teach science and mathematics (e.g. Amhara Region). From grade 9 onwards, however, English is the sole official MOI, with the exception of teacher training colleges.

The teaching of English in primary 1st cycle (grades 1-4) is done by teachers trained at teacher training institutes (TTIs). They are trained for eight months, after completing grade 10, in the methodology of teaching the different subjects. These teachers are expected to handle self-contained classes in which they teach all subjects to one group of students. English language teaching in primary 2nd cycle, beginning at grade 5, is conducted by teachers who study English as a major field of study or who major in an Ethiopian language and minor in English. Teachers for grades 7 and 8 are normally expected to have a diploma from a teacher training college (TTC). English for secondary school students is taught by teachers who have a university degree in English. To earn a university degree, trainees need a minimum of four years of study, of which the first year of study used to consist of intensive language training meant to compensate for their deficiency in the language. Recently, however, the freshman programme was done away with, the assumption being that students undergo two years of preparatory study – in grades 11 and 12. However, students in grades 11 and 12 are often taught English by teachers with three years of university education.

Most college and university instructors have Master’s degrees or training beyond the M.A. Addis Ababa University has so far been the only university in the country to train teachers at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels.

In sum, the teaching of English as a subject in the first cycle of primary is seriously under-resourced. The teaching of English as a subject and its use as a medium of
instruction during the second cycle of primary, is also seriously under-resourced. In both instances, teacher under-preparedness is a major factor.

SECTION III: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodology and instruments

While the amount and quality of the data collected ultimately depended on time and availability of key informants, we aimed to get a range of data from each region visited. The main part of the data would be qualitative, because we needed to learn from education personnel at all levels about regional policies and practices and people’s attitudes toward them. However, we also aimed to distribute written questionnaires and collect documents and statistical data that could be triangulated with results of the descriptive data to determine whether or not we had the correct impressions. The following are the principal means of data collection that we used, and for each we describe our justification.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Regional Education Bureaus, zonal, and woreda education officials, TTI/TTC deans and instructors, Parent Teacher Association members and other parents, primary and secondary school directors and department heads, school teachers, practicum (student) teachers and students. In some cases, we were also able to speak with regional leaders such as Women’s Bureau representatives. We selected as needed from lists of possible questions that were guided by our objectives as discussed above, and had been piloted in Addis at the beginning of the fieldwork, but we also added our own questions as issues arose. All interviews were audio taped, videotaped, or recorded in detailed handwritten notes, all of which were later transformed into field notes. The objective of the interviews was to determine regional policy and practice, respondents’ attitudes toward these, and any other issues relevant to language education.

Focus group discussions were conducted with many of the people mentioned above, when they were in small groups. The objectives were the same, to explore educational practice related to language education policy and discover people’s attitudes toward these; focus groups enabled people like parents and students to hear each other’s thoughts and agree or disagree with them, allowing for lively debate at times. We found that more open questions generated more relevant information, so discussions took directions of their own.

Classroom observations were conducted in primary and secondary schools in both urban and rural settings, with the agreed focus on the medium of instruction in rural primary schools since we believe that language issues are most influential outside the city. The observation checklist was piloted in Addis Ababa. The purpose here was to make global observations on classroom conditions, classroom language practices, materials availability and what student notebooks revealed about teaching and learning.

SECTION IV: FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from this research on medium of instruction in both regions in both tabular and descriptive form. We begin with a summary table that characterises the situation as we understand it in each region. We then go into detail region by region, discussing MOI policy and practice, people’s attitudes toward these, effective practices, areas of potential difficulty, and recommendations. Next, we
summarise the overall trends across the country, along with the similarities and differences between regions, using as our frame of reference the national educational language policy. Finally, we present the findings of national assessments in terms of language of instruction.

4.1 Policy and practice in the two regions

As discussed in the methodology section, our aim was to get as much information about each region as possible. We have supplemented field data with information from the regions themselves as well as other written and oral sources, and provide rich descriptions and examples wherever possible.

In the next section we will take up the situation in each region, discussing regional policy and practice, its consistency with MOE policy, and people’s reasoning and attitudes toward the regional situation. We will describe effective practices we encountered, indicate areas of potential difficulty or concern, and provide a brief analysis for the region.

4.1.1 Gambella Region

Regional policy/practice: In Gambella region there are three languages used as MOI in the 1st cycle of primary schooling: Nuer, Anguak and Mezhenger. English becomes the MOI as of grade 5, and the teacher training matches this, i.e. 1st cycle primary teachers are trained in one of the three local languages and 2nd cycle primary teachers are trained in English. Those from outside Gambella attend either Nuer or Anguak medium schools.

Gambella region model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>…used as MOI</th>
<th>…taught as a subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother tongue (L1):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuer</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>1-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anguak</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mezhenger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amharic (L2)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>3-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English (FL)</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>1-8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consistency with MOE policy directives: Because the Gambella regional policy does not allow for mother tongue as MOI in the 2nd cycle, it diverges considerably from the MOE directives. The change to English as MOI at grade 5 allows for only four years of English study as a subject, which is unlikely to prepare students for academic use of English unless, as some claim, students are exposed to English outside the classroom; their English competence would need to be tested to confirm the claim. The MOI of 2nd cycle teacher training does match the MOI of 2nd cycle primary schooling because both are English, although this does not represent the intent of federal policy.

Reasoning and attitudes: According to REB officials, if regional governments have the right to decide on the MOI, then the model currently in place in Gambella should continue because people are happy with it. The main reason we were given for beginning English MOI at grade 5 is to better prepare students for English MOI at the secondary level, a reason echoed by local language specialists and public officials.
including representatives of the Women’s Bureau. Another reason given by school directors was that there is a shortage of teachers who speak the local languages as well as a shortage of materials. (According to the REB, this shortage of 1st cycle teachers who speak Nuer and Anguak was relieved at the end of November by the graduation of “more students than needed.” It was not explained how schools will compensate for the part of the curriculum which students have missed since the beginning of the year.)

Most teachers appear to agree with the current policy, saying that by the time students reach grade 9, they will have “no problem” learning all subjects in English. No one claimed to have evidence that this is so; rather it seems to be a generalised hope. According to REB officials, Amharic was used as a MOI at the primary level for more than half a century, but even then it was difficult for students to deal with the English medium at the secondary level. One REB educator told us that he disagrees with the current policy, and feels the best MOI for grades 1 to 6 would be the mother tongue because children understand better when they are taught in their mother tongue. However, he felt that English should become the MOI at grade 7 because students face a shortage of reference materials in the mother tongue.

According to TTC educators who speak local languages, students were forced to learn in Amharic in the past, but the problem was that there are “too many letters” in Amharic that do not represent sounds in Nuer and Anguak. It was reported that current forms of writing these languages use appropriate letters to represent their sounds so that students “do not have any psychological problem” and can easily understand lessons given in the MT. These TTC educators said that parents are very happy about the new curriculum and about the use of Nuer and Anguak as MOI in grades 1-4. This would seem to lend support for mother tongue as MOI up to at least grade 6, yet there was strong opposition on the part of some native speakers, the reason being that students might have difficulty in the future (at grade 9). The TTC staff members we interviewed felt that the “language problem” at grade 9 should be dealt with by beginning English MOI in the 2nd cycle of primary schooling.

A similar ambivalence was found at the primary school level. While teachers reported that students have problems understanding lessons in English in grade 5 and “a lot of hard work is required” at that level, two school directors said they wished that English could be used as MOI from grade 1 with the mother tongue taught only as a subject, to prepare students as private schools do for the level of English required by secondary education.

In reference to policies in other regions, representatives of the Women’s Affairs Bureau said they felt that the problem in some other regions is that students learn in mother tongue from grades 1 to 8 and then find it difficult to cope with the English medium when they reach grade 9. They added, “Whether we like it or not, the world is becoming one” and therefore students should learn English.

Practices observed: In Gambella it appears that one issue affecting mother tongue instruction at the lower primary level is a shortage of teachers who are native speakers of Nuer and Anguak. Teachers who do not know the language of instruction very well reportedly use Amharic. This shortage appears to be caused by the greater opportunities for Nuer and Anguak speaking teachers to get better positions, e.g. at offices in the regional administration, often after only a year of teaching. This is apparently a problem at the teacher training level as well, making the training of native speakers difficult and depriving non-native speakers of any exposure to Nuer and Anguak, the languages to be used as MOI in the schools where they will teach upon graduation. (We
do not know how many non-native speakers are in teacher training programmes, but obviously it is best to recruit native speakers and those who are highly competent already, as TTC programmes do not offer additional language training.)

Another issue discussed by informants is the lack of mother tongue education for students who do not speak Nuer and Anguak because their families migrated to Gambella from other regions. Thus far they must learn through one of the local languages, but two primary principals mentioned that parents and teachers have been “complaining” but it is beyond their capacity to find a solution. They have requested help at regional meetings but so far no response has been given. It is their impression that most non-locals are sending their children at great expense to private English medium schools, where students are believed to gain better English language ability.

A final issue that was raised concerns the level of Amharic learned by primary students. Despite the fact that (as mentioned above) many teachers are non-native speakers of Nuer and Anguak and prefer to use Amharic, students reportedly find it difficult to read in Amharic even at grades 5 and 6. This may reflect inadequate teaching methodology for Amharic as a subject, but in addition, there may be differences in student attitudes. For example, it was reported that Anguak speaking students had little problem expressing themselves in Amharic, while Nuer speaking students had a more positive attitude toward speaking English. In fact, Nuer speaking students we observed in upper primary seemed to speak relatively better English than we observed among other students or in other regions, and the same could be said for teachers.

Analysis: One effective practice is that language competence in Nuer, Anguak or Mezhenger is not only a requirement for teaching in the appropriate schools, it is also a requirement for being trained at the TTCs. It appears that some effort on the part of the REB and TTCs is being put into recruiting and training more native speakers of these languages, despite the difficulty in keeping qualified teachers in their positions. The problem of losing Nuer and Anguak speaking teachers to other posts demonstrates that there is a demand for their language skills, but it also means that it may be difficult to retain trained teachers. However, we were told at the workshop that there is no shortage of teachers who are native speakers, so it seems that the supply meets the demand.

As in other regions, the attitudes expressed in this region clearly reflect people’s concern that students learn adequate English to prepare them for successful secondary schooling. However, it seems that there is still an understanding that the mother tongue is useful for teaching and learning, as evidenced not only by Nuer and Anguak supporters but also by the speakers of other languages who are demanding mother tongue schooling.

4.1.2 SNNPR REGION

Regional policy/practice: In the South the mother tongues of many groups are used as MOI but only in the 1st cycle of primary education. The languages used in lower primary are listed alphabetically in the model below. For the 2nd cycle, only English is used as MOI, but students whose mother tongues are Amharic, Gedeo, Gofa, Hadiya, Kembata, Korete and Sidama study their languages as subjects through grade 8. (Please note that there may be some discrepancies in the names of languages.)
SNNPR region model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>...used as MOI ...taught as a subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother tongue (L1):</td>
<td>All are used as MOI in grades 1-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amharic*</td>
<td>1-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dawro*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gamo*</td>
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<td>Gedeofa*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gofa*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hadiya*</td>
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<td>Kabena</td>
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<td>Kafinono*</td>
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<td>Kembata*</td>
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<td>Kontigna*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korete*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sidama*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Silti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolaita*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amharic (L2)</td>
<td>3-8</td>
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<tr>
<td>English (FL)</td>
<td>5-8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Consistency with MOE policy: The practice in SNNPR does not allow for mother tongue as MOI in the 2nd cycle, meaning that it is not consistent with MOE policy, though speakers of most languages are able to study the mother tongue as a subject throughout their primary schooling. Like in Gambella, the shift to English as MOI at grade 5 is probably too soon for students to understand the academic content; and unlike Gambella, there is little indication that students are exposed to English outside the classroom. The MOI of 2nd cycle teacher training does match the MOI of 2nd cycle primary schooling because both are English, but this does not represent the intent of federal policy.

Reasoning and attitudes: According to a TTC official, the regional model was decided by politicians and has no basis in research. Another reason given was the difficulty in recruiting 2nd cycle teacher trainees from all of the necessary language groups, though this does not explain why English was chosen instead of taking at least the existing language speakers. We learned at the zonal office that the TTCs do train enough speakers of at least some of the languages (including Gamo, Gofa and Wolaita) at the diploma level, although there is reportedly a shortage of teachers who speak Sidama. However, this argument was also mentioned by REB educators, who told us that they sent a report to the SNNPR Administration about two years ago giving the following reasons for choosing English as exclusive MOI for the 2nd cycle:

- There are 56 languages in the region, some mutually intelligible, and 13 are used in schooling. Many have even been used as MOI through grade 6, but because others were only used to grade 4 this was considered “unsystematic”.
- Having used English as MOI for diploma training for some time despite the fact that 2nd cycle teaching should have been in the mother tongues, teachers lost competence in using their own languages as MOI. Therefore they need more training on orthography, as well as the meaning and use of some technical words.
- Lack of trained teachers in some mother tongues.
Students, teachers and parents want English as a medium from Grade 5. From our discussions with teachers in the region, it was apparent that they indeed support the English medium policy. A group of teachers at a Sidama school told us that parents are happy that their children are learning in their native tongue, but they are also happy that the medium for the second cycle has become only English. According to these teachers, parents believe learning in the mother tongue is economically disadvantageous to their children, and see Amharic--and better yet English--as languages that are good for future employment. Meanwhile, the same teachers admitted that using English as a medium creates problems for student understanding and they must often interpret into the mother tongue. A large group of teachers at a Wolaita school echoed this sentiment and, when asked why they did not support their own mother tongue, said that they were marginalised by the prior education system and they wanted to have the same access to English as speakers of other languages.

Meanwhile, however, staff at a zonal office told us they are working with REB and TTC experts to develop the languages more. The curriculum development staff in the zone is very busy developing materials along with the woredas; at the zonal office we saw new teachers’ guides and student textbooks in progress for environmental science in Gamo and Gofa. In addition, we learned that they have asked the government for funds to develop Gamo and Gofa materials for study of those languages as subjects at the secondary level. Finally, the REB participants in the workshop assured us that the regional policy is not permanent but rather dynamic, and that “as long as inputs are improved, the policy on the MOI can be changed.”

Observations: We were able to observe rural schools for speakers of Gamo, Wolaita and Sidama. In all schools there were severe shortages of books, and we were told that not enough books can be printed due to budget problems. An effective practice we encountered is the appropriate placement of teachers based on their mother tongues, which zonal and woreda staff told us was no problem.

Analysis: In this region, fear of further marginalization appears to lead to negative attitudes toward people’s own languages and overly positive attitudes toward English and Amharic. As a TTC administrator commented, “To be educated used to mean speaking Amharic very well; now it means speaking English, and only those who cannot afford private schooling are sending their children to mother tongue medium schools.” People may also be worried about the quality of schooling for their children, which may be a valid concern given the large class size and lack of learning materials we observed. “The main reason for the declining quality of education in government schools is not the language; it is the method of teaching” said the same TTC administrator, “but parents think it could be the language problem.” Teachers and senior school management staff at a secondary school indicated that although the ELIP programme had assisted in improving teachers confidence in speaking English, and even using ‘broken English’ in the classroom, this confidence had worn off within a few months of the course having been completed.

Another issue of concern is how the region justified removing mother tongues from the 2nd cycle of primary schooling. Because not all were used up to grade 6, policymakers thought it was better to replace them all with English. Using each of the 13 languages up to the level of schooling possible would be more consistent with MOE directives, provide students with more learning opportunities, and contribute toward development of each language to higher levels.
A final issue of concern in the South is that the earlier inconsistency of MOI at the TTC level, i.e. using English for 2nd cycle training, was actually one reason for the region to change the MOI at the upper primary school to English. Teacher training is normally designed to train teachers with appropriate skills and competencies for the school system in which they will work, but in this case the region allowed a de facto language policy at the college to influence MOI for school children.

4.2 National assessment results and quality implications

“Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue” the 1994 Education and Training Policy stipulates that the medium of instruction for primary education grades 1-8 will be nationality languages. In implementing this policy different models of language use in education are employed in the different regions of the country. Most of the regions employ the respective nationality languages or widely used familiar Ethiopian languages as MOI for the 1st cycle of primary education. However, for the 2nd cycle different models of shift or entry into the English medium are practiced. This section focuses on the following key questions:

- To what extent does the use of the mother tongue versus English as MOI affect students’ overall achievement?
- To what extent does the use of English versus the mother tongue as MOI contribute to students’ achievement in English?

In order to answer these questions, the Grade 8 Assessment results from 2000 and 2004 will be examined. These assessments have been conducted by the National Organization for Examinations (NOE) of the Ministry of Education in collaboration with USAID. Student performance in mathematics and the sciences is far better for those using mother tongues as MOI than for those using English as MOI. These findings reveal that the use of mother tongues as MOI for Mathematics and Sciences in upper primary education (grades 7 and 8) has a positive impact on student achievement scores.

Perhaps one of the most striking findings is that there is only a slight difference in English achievement between students learning through English and those learning through mother tongue. This demonstrates that the use of English as MOI does not have a significant effect on students’ mean achievement scores in English. The assumption, therefore, that English MOI leads to better achievement in English is not confirmed by assessment data. As many scholars have argued, use of English as MOI in African linguistic settings where English is limited to school use does not facilitate the teaching and learning of either English or other subjects.

4.3 Data from questionnaires administered in the regions

4.3.1 Findings from the educators’ questionnaires

Certain questions were selected for specific analysis for this study and report. As mentioned above, the questionnaires captured too much data for the attention of this study and it would be necessary to make a selection. The ethnographic data collected during the first four three weeks of fieldwork informed the final selection of items for analysis for this report. It became obvious during the range of discussions and interviews with informants in both regions that educators had firm views about the readiness of students to study through the medium of English, and that the role of English as a medium of instruction was uppermost in the minds of educators at all levels. The questions selected for specific attention therefore were those which were intended to elicit information about the readiness of learners to use English as a
medium, in general, across the curriculum and more particularly as a medium of instruction for some subjects rather than others.

Responses to question 5 which asks a generic question about learner readiness for English as a MOI, shows that informants in Gambella and SNNPR, where students switch to English medium in theory, in grade 5, believe that students are ready for the switch to English at the point that these regions require students to make the transition.

Question 9 asks informants to identify when students would be ready to study mathematics through English only. The majority of respondents, but fewer than in the case of question 5, in Gambella and SNNPR continue to indicate that this is possible at the existing point of transition (grade 5). For the rest, however, respondents indicate a wider spread of responses suggesting that students can only fully understand mathematics in English somewhere between grades 7 and 12.

Question 10 asks informants to identify when students would be ready to study the natural sciences (physics, chemistry and biology) in English only. At this point fewer than half of the respondents in Gambella and SNNPR, and only 18 of 152 respondents indicate that students are ready to study science in English in grade 5. One third of the respondents (54) indicate that this is possible from grade 7. On the other hand, 75 (50%) believe that this is only possible from grades 9 or above.

Question 11 asks the same question, but in relation to the social sciences. Again, what is discernible is an upward shift towards identifying higher-grade levels as the point of proficiency in English.

Finally, question 12, a rephrased version of question 5, for comparative purposes, shows a shift in perception from the initial answers to question 5 which were offered prior to an interrogation of the role of English as a medium in different subjects of the curriculum. 32% of respondents believed that students were ready for English medium by grade 5, when the question was first put to them. After a series of more finely grained questions were administered, informants recorded a significant shift in answer. By question 12 only 3% of the respondents expressed a belief that students were fully ready for English medium by grade 5. Only 20% expressed a belief that students are ready by grade 7 and 51% believed students to be ready after somewhere between grade 9 and university.

The first point of this rather tedious enumeration is that education planners need to be very wary of taking informants responses to questions at initial or face value. The issues around medium of instruction are extremely complex, and if one needs precise information, one has to make detailed and painstaking enquiries to elicit responses to hypothetical questions at a deeper level.

The second point of this account is to illustrate that generic questions which tap surface level responses cannot yield accurate or useful information and should not be used for educational decisions. What is required are disaggregated sets of questions which prise open the relationship between language and learning in different contexts, in order to get a broader understanding of the dynamics.

4.3.2 Findings from the parents’ and students’ questionnaires

Again, only selected findings from these questionnaires will be presented here. In this case, some of the open-ended constructed response items have been selected for analysis and these concern the perceived roles of language/s outside of school settings. The reality is that most students will remain in their local environments or regions for some time after exiting the school system. Both parents and students indicated that the
languages most used in the community were the local mother tongues. The next language of wider communication was identified as Amharic where Amharic is not the MT. Languages perceived to have greatest economic value were the local MT at local/district level, and either the local MT or Amharic at regional level. Amharic featured most often as the language of economic opportunity at national level, and sometimes, Amharic together with English appeared as a combined possibility for economic activity at national level. Both parents and students however indicated strong aspiration towards English as a preferred, but not the only language of education.

What the parents’ and students’ questionnaires illustrate is that while there is strong aspiration towards English in education, both sets of informants have a realistic view of the role of Ethiopian languages outside of the school setting. This is in relation to the dominant, functional, role of the local, regional and national languages of Ethiopia as the languages, which offer economic opportunity. Both parents and students indicate a realism towards the functional role of Amharic as a lingua franca for communication across different language communities and among the different regions.

SECTION V: RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is an unprecedented aspiration towards English in both regions in Ethiopia, and found even in remote rural villages in SNNPR, neither the current strategies which have been put in place nor those which are believed to be the best solutions can deliver what is so ardently desired. Extensive investment in plasma lessons in the English language only at secondary school is unlikely to deliver a positive return on investment. While there are positive outcomes of the investment in ELIP, these are not those which had been anticipated by the federal government. Not only can a system-wide intervention in improving English language proficiency not deliver the level of English language expertise required for using English as MOI, its implementation is exacerbating unrealistic expectations about the possibilities for English in the country. Both the use of plasma in English only in secondary and the ELIP programme are contributing towards the unrealistic pressure to introduce English medium earlier in the primary school, and to the escalation of unrealistic aspirations towards English in the country.

Mother tongue education, which includes teaching of the MT as a subject and the use of MT as the medium of instruction, should be provided throughout primary school, i.e. 8 years, in both regions.

Speakers of languages other than Amharic, should be encouraged to learn Amharic as a second language in school. This is because Amharic is a significant lingua franca across most regions. It facilitates access, equity & portability of skills for further education and employment opportunity across different regions in Ethiopia.

All students should be provided with quality teaching of English as an international language of wider communication and as a subject throughout primary and secondary school. But this should be done only under optimal language acquisition circumstances.

Finally, academic literacy in English / English for academic purposes programme should be re-introduced at undergraduate level in colleges and universities.
References