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The Role of English Language in Ethiopia and Its Implication for Teaching: From Daily Academic Routines to Science and Technology

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Abstract

Language is a marker of identity and a tool for representing local values and culture. On the one hand, the right to study one's own language is now considered a basic human right (Segota 2001). On the other hand, there is an urgently-felt need, particularly among the younger generation, to interact with the global world culture. Universities in Ethiopia are also facing the challenge of achieving internationally recognized academic excellence and status, mainly through the medium of English, while at the same time serving the needs of the local population. The two extremes are not being considered by teachers, officials and researchers in the area. However, this paper focuses on the role of English language in Ethiopia, in relation to the global context. But, it also underscores the need to learn primary education in the local languages, not at the expense of the English language.

The Status and Roles of English in Ethiopia

The present government (EFDR) revived and strengthened the role of English as a medium of instruction. It has been stated that the New Education and Training Policy, in 1994, has capitalized the role that English plays in the education system and the recent introduction of English as a subject starting from Grade one and the allocation of greater English contact hours at tertiary level indicate the present government's concern and commitment to improve the quality of English (Hailemichael, 1993; Haregwoine, 2008).

Since the introduction of the New Education and Training Policy in 1994, English has been taught as a subject in Grade 1 in all regions, without exception. Some private schools even went to the extent of using English as a medium of instruction at the primary level. Apart from this, according to the policy, regional governments may determine their own policies on the language of education in Grades 1 to 8. Thus in some regions local languages are used as medium of instruction (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 in yet others English is partially used as MOI to teach science and mathematics (e.g. Amhara Region).

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The students could not follow their studies in English because their knowledge of English was poor and the teachers could not help their students since they themselves were not good at English. The teaching of English as a subject and its use as a medium of instruction in the first and the second cycle of the primary school is also seriously under-resourced.

The Role of English Language in Ethiopia

English language has several and strong functions/roles in Ethiopia too. Of those roles English plays in Ethiopia, the educational/instructional role is the long-standing and dominant one. Trade and business communication, advertisement and entertainment, administration and office communication are some of the other growing roles English is fulfilling.

Educational Roles

English is taught as a subject from grade one and is a medium of instruction from grade nine through colleges and universities nation-wide. All universities in the country are supposed to use English as their working language; they ought to produce documents, hold meetings, write minutes and reports and such in English.

Apart from these nationally consistent practices, different regions have adopted different regional policies and attitudes towards English in their education system; some of the regions have made English to be a medium of instruction from grade 5, some from grade 7 and some from grade 9 (Heugh et al. 2006). In those schools students are supposed to carry out their academic activities in English language. Especially, students are required to read different academic books which are written in the English language. They are also required to demonstrate their understanding in the form of term papers, assignments, project work and various reports, written in English.

Moreover, English language ability is mandatory even to access information about different government institutions including the FDRE Ministry of Education.

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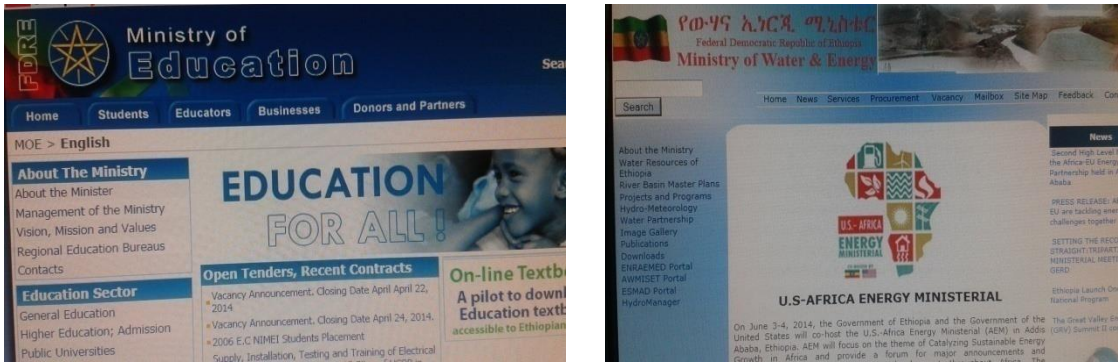


Fig. 1: Two Government Institutions' Official Web Sites

English in Entertainment and Media

One of the areas where English is most accessible in Africa, of which Ethiopia is also a part, is probably entertainment and the media. Though there are some local entertainment videos, video films produced in Hollywood have inundated African/Ethiopian urban areas. Football is another popular social event to which Ethiopians have access through English, the English Premier League being the most famous programme. Television has played a significant role in captivating Africans'/Ethiopians' attention. Despite some countries' unwillingness to privatize their state-owned television companies (Shimim, 2008), or expand the range of their broadcasts, many international news and entertainment programmes are available for free, or for fee through private satellite dishes.

In Ethiopia, by the 1990s, English was still rarely used in the media: there was only one official newspaper, *The Ethiopian Herald*, one television programme and one radio broadcast in English (which was limited to one hour per day). Today, radio broadcasts have still not changed much, apart from FM stations transmitting music in English. But we now have far more English language newspapers than ever before. The total number of newspapers has increased dramatically from three to more than 15. A simple internet search generates list of current print and online English newspapers and magazines (15 in number).

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Internet-based communication has also grown rapidly over recent years, thanks to the expansion of IT facilities. Hence, people can access online international news outlets, including the BBC and CNN. Despite the relatively small number of citizens who are literate in English, it is amazing to observe the eagerness of many – especially young people – to chat in English. Several websites are available (including BBC opinion columns) where Africans can debate politics, economics and so on.

English as the “Language of Diplomacy”

African countries use English as one of the major working languages at AU meetings, seminars and conferences. The leaders, policy makers and experts meet in different cities in Africa to debate multifaceted issues, mostly using English. For instance, AU parliamentary meetings are often conducted in English, with parallel translations into other international working languages such as Arabic, French, or Portuguese. Similarly, in other continental organizations like COMESSA, NEPAD, EGAD, and so on, in which Ethiopia has a leading role either in hosting, or chairing the sessions, African leaders come together to debate different development issues (such as climate negotiations, peace and stability, etc.) using English.

University professors who participated in the 5th International Conference on Federalism, held in Ethiopia in December 2010, reported that – although participants came from many countries where languages other than English are spoken – all the sessions were conducted in English. This indicates that English language literacy is quite vital to participate and maintain mutual interest through negotiation.

For example, a biodiversity academic who has participated in many negotiations and conferences in Africa, Europe and Asia expressed the importance of English as follows:

We feel the importance of English when we participate in international negotiations that involve people from Africa and other regions. Usually the

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ones from English-speaking countries express their ideas very clearly and dominate debates.

(Shamim: 2008:45)

English for Business and Tourism

Today, African countries formerly known for civil war, such as Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Ethiopia, have grown to be tourist destinations. As the tourism sector continues to expand, which it definitely will, there will be many African industries, airlines, hotels, handicraft manufacturers, tour operators and travel agencies that will reap dividends. This sector creates job opportunities for many people, even for the low-skilled ones. However, its success in packaging and selling of products and services for tourists depends on competence in one of the international languages. English is an important tool of communication between Ethiopians and visitors from all parts of the globe. The importance of English will, therefore, increase as Ethiopians gear up to attract the growing tourist numbers from Asia, Europe and other African countries. For example, a report from the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (English Xinhua.net 2010), indicates that in 2009 alone about 381,000 Chinese tourists travelled to Africa and about the same number of Africans (401,000) visited China.

The demand for English does not arise from language policy only. It arises also from outward-looking economic development strategies; for example, through attracting foreign investors and tourists or selling products abroad. To bring their citizens out of poverty, African governments encourage their citizens to produce goods and crops for foreign markets. Navuri (2010) gives the example of Tanzanian farmers being challenged to produce cotton to export to the hungry textile industries of Turkey. The cash crops which Africans export include coffee from Ethiopia and Kenya, cotton and sugar from West and Central Africa and cocoa from West Africa. These are produced by a mix of large-scale and small-scale farming operations (mainly the latter). Here are two sample home pages of big business organization which accommodate a huge number of clients. Their home pages are designed in the English language.

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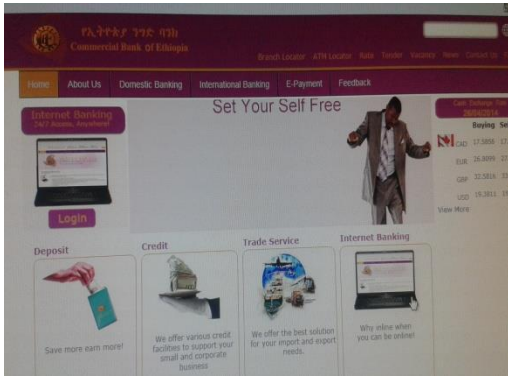


Fig.2: Two Business Organizations' Web Site Home Page

English for Parallel/Alternative Daily Routines

Most government, public and private organizations in Ethiopia, not to mention international organizations, use English side by side with the federal working language, Amharic, or as a sole working language in trans-boundary communications. To prove this prevalent use of English in almost all sectors and services, though not supported by legislature, one doesn't need to undertake research; a simple conduct of surveys of websites and documents of various organizations should suffice.

As Pennycook (2010) and Ouedraogo (2000) discuss, the role of English in business and economy, is one of the most important factors, as it helps a nation to become globally competitive, or at least be a beneficiary. The increasing use of English in most government and business sectors in Ethiopia, hence, can be attributed to such global challenges and benefits.

Generally speaking, English, or at least mixing English while using a local language, is perceived by the majority of societies as a sign of being educated and modernized. On the contrary, nevertheless, most graduates leave school and colleges with a very low level of English as the English language teaching, in general, has been faced with several challenges.

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The Role of Language in Science Learning

What is the connection between language and learning? Well, as Henderson and Wellington (1998) very succinctly put it, “The quality of the classroom language is bound up with the quality of learning.” (p. 36) Wellington and Osborne (2001) further explain that “language development and conceptual development are inextricably linked. Thought requires language, language requires thought” (p. 6). Explained from the Vygotskyian point of view, when a learner uses words, he or she is helped to develop concepts. Language thus acts both as a psychological tool that helps a learner form thought, as well as the mental function itself.

With reference to science education, Wellington and Osborne (2001) underline that research findings indicate that language, in all its forms, matters to science education. In particular, it is not just the language in itself, but rather what educators do with language. This is because what educators do with the language, inadvertently affects how the learner uses the language and that is fundamental to the learning of science.

Thus, the next question that arises then is “Why is language important in science education?” With regards to this, literature suggests that one of the important features of science is the richness of the words and terms it uses and that students need to at some point be able to advance into “abstract” thought with the use of language, if they are to master key scientific concepts (Wellington and Osborne, 2001; Kober, 2004).

Language Problems and Science Learning

Wellington and Osborne (2001) and Kim (2007: 47) listed the following problems of English language learning which are associated with science instructors and learning science:

- teachers who teach content do not recognize language learning opportunities;

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- scientific terms, whether technical or non-technical, are unique in nature and they are seldom encountered in other contexts;
- having to learn a new language at the same time students are required to acquire new subject matter;
- science teachers often consider it to be of marginal relevance to the learning of science;
- teachers ignore the language needs of students in content courses when under pressure to cover the syllabus;
- If at all, there is any effort in incorporating language development, they just concentrate on vocabulary development, and
- Academic language is more abstract than social language and in science; common words can take on specialized meanings.

Conclusions

The world is becoming a small village due to globalization. To be part of the ongoing global phenomenon and to gain maximum outputs which are significant for development and survival, citizens need proper communication skills/competence. Especially, Ethiopia, which is one of the fast growing countries of the world, needs competent English language skills, so that it will have a worldwide communication capacity which facilitates its development.

Though learning the local languages is very important, especially in primary level, the language of wider communication must be given considerable attention in schools. This is because schools are places where students prepare themselves for global contexts in which languages of wider communication, such as English, have a pivotal role. That means, as students approach the global situation, they need more English so as to meet their needs apart from mere communication.

Schools are predominantly responsible to prepare citizens to solve societal problems through scientific investigation. To carry out this core task, apart from having

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knowledge scientific principles and procedures, they should encourage students to have a good command of the English language. Because, it is through English that students get global research knowledge and experience, even at early period of their research practice. In addition, they need the English language to communicate and disseminate their research output for the global community and scholars.

Therefore, schools should closely monitor the teaching and learning of the language, and identify and solve problems related to it for the students' success in the future. There are instances (for example, Ethiopia and Zambia) that show that citizens or children are not taught properly, to develop communicative competence (Haile-Michael 1993, Negash 2005). Williams (2011) cites teacher-dominated classroom interaction which focuses on rote learning instead of meaning comprehension; this leads to lack of competence in English. The national education policy document for Ethiopia (FDRE, 2000) expresses a similar kind of dissatisfaction with English language teaching methodology, which does not help students achieve a meaningful, or working level of proficiency even after many years of formal schooling.

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