

# Language Policy in Ethiopian Education System: Competing Assumptions and Practices

Fadil J. Abbagidi<sup>1,\*</sup>, Mulugeta Tsegai<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Teacher Education, Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Mekelle University, Ethiopia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Educational Planning and Management, Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Mekelle University, Ethiopia

Received December 12, 2023; Revised February 14, 2024; Accepted March 20, 2024

## Cite This Paper in the Following Citation Styles

(a): [1] Fadil J. Abbagidi, Mulugeta Tsegai, "Language Policy in Ethiopian Education System: Competing Assumptions and Practices," *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 35-48, 2024. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2024.120202.

(b): Fadil J. Abbagidi, Mulugeta Tsegai (2024). *Language Policy in Ethiopian Education System: Competing Assumptions and Practices*. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 12(2), 35-48. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2024.120202.

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**Abstract** Understanding why certain policy choices were made, why they worked or failed, and the distal and long-term consequences they produced requires a rigorous analysis. Analyzing the existing language policies in the Ethiopian education system requires an in-depth understanding of the policy alternatives available, the rationale behind the policy choices made, the results achieved through endorsing the policy options and, the planned and unplanned effects of the policy adopted. This manuscript, therefore, presents a detailed account of language policy in the Ethiopian education system with particular emphasis given to the general education system. Through utilizing a systematic content analysis approach, the paper attempted to explicate the competing assumptions that shaped the development, implementation and evaluation of language policies in the Ethiopian education system. The review revealed the existence of various competing assumptions that influenced the adoption and implementation of language policies in the Ethiopian education system. The political ideologies espoused remained to be one of the fundamental forces that shaped and influenced the selection and use of instructional language policies in Ethiopia. Similarly, the quest for cultural pluralism and the right to use, develop and promote one's cultural, traditional and linguistic heritages in the education was observed to be one of the pillars of the longstanding struggles between competing claims. Apart from this, global dynamics such as international relations, colonialism, UN declaration of universal human rights, the global commitment to EFA, MDGs and SDGs played a salient role in influencing Ethiopia's education policy in

general and the language policy in particular. The existence of such diverse interests often challenged the successful implementation of the policy which also impacted the quality of the instructional process, students' rate of learning and achievement. Based on the review results, the implications of the findings on language policy, quality of education, instructional process and teachers' professional development are discussed.

**Keywords** Language, Policy, Education, Culture, Society, Diversity

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## 1. Introduction

Policy discourses and debates on instructional language are not new in the Ethiopian education system [1-8]. Mixed with competing and at times conflicting political and socio-cultural views, the decision of which language to use to teach children of all ages remained a topic of hot discussion. For instance, the recent move by the Ministry of Education [7] to introduce the subject "Amharic as a mother tongue language" for all pre-primary and primary school children was seen by critics as an effort to reembark the old monolithic language policy. Similarly, a national workshop televised by Ethiopian Satellite Tele Vision (ESAT) on November, 19, 2022 was held at Ras Hotel Addis on the topic "ዝክረ ፊደል" meaning "Remembering Alphabets". In this workshop, advocates of the "Monolithic Language Policy" proposed the need to

change the “Latin alphabets” used in writing “Afaan Oromo” and many other regional states’ languages into the “Geez letters”. Critics raised grave concern suggesting that such a proposal is aimed at dismantling the existing multilingual educational policies. Besides, these moves were seen as unconstitutional and regressive as it went against ensuring the equality of all languages, the right of children to receive education in their own mother tongue and the right of the people to protect and promote their cultural and linguistic heritages [9]. On the other hand, the endorsement of a new multi-lingual education curriculum by Addis Abeba City Administration cabinet on January 12, 2023 was seen by critics, at the other end of the spectrum, as a political decision made to shape the linguistic and cultural landscape of the city. The new curriculum introduced Afaan Oromo as an additional language to be taught in primary schools that predominantly use Amharic as a medium of instruction. Similarly, the curriculum added Amharic language as an additional subject to be given in all Afaan Oromo schools across the city. One can fairly argue, that the choice of language as an instructional medium has been and still is a wider policy debate and scholarly discourse in Ethiopia. The existing linguistic diversity, and the quest for cultural pluralism and inclusion among various ethnic groups will continue to serve as a battling ground between competing claims and assumptions revolving around the education policy making environment. As such, it will continue to influence the choice and use of instructional language at all levels of the education system. Nevertheless, the existing contests seem to be deeply rooted in numerous historical, political and socio-cultural realities. This article is aimed at exploring these realities as they influenced and shaped the development, current trends and future prospective of language policies in the Ethiopian education system. The review process was guided by the following questions:

1. How do educational policy premises and practices address the linguistic priorities of the wider Ethiopian society?
2. What deriving forces influenced the selection of language as a medium of instruction in the Ethiopian education system?

## 2. Methods and Materials

For the purpose of writing this article, both primary and secondary sources were used. Various legal frameworks, policy intentions and strategic provisions on the use of language as a medium of instruction were explored from the introduction of modern education in Ethiopia in 1906 to date. Apart from this, secondary sources were consulted from various databases. Electronic databases (e.g., Google scholar and Google search engine) were examined using a combination of keywords and descriptors around instructional language policy. In addition, electronic searches of the table of contents and abstracts in

educational and linguistic research journals were examined to identify relevant articles. In addition, careful screening of relevant working papers, chapters in edited books and MoE reports was made to identify relevant studies for use. In screening and selecting the articles, criteria such as the *substantive focus of the articles*, *the methodological rigor employed* and the *relevance of the insights* offered by the articles were used. Accordingly, 31 articles, 8 books, 4 working papers and 2 dissertations published between 1996 and 2023 were used as sources for the review. After the final screening, a systematic content analysis method [10,11] was used to identify major themes, patterns and trends in instructional language and medium of instruction policies and strategies. The analysis was framed focusing on the historical, political and socio-cultural rationale for the selection and use of language in the Ethiopian education system.

## 3. Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the major results of the review. The discussion is framed based on the major themes identified and the review questions posed. In presenting the results, an attempt was made to depict the competing assumptions and the historical battle ground for instructional language policy and strategic priorities in the Ethiopian education system.

### 3.1. The Historical Development of Language Policy in Ethiopian Education System

The history of modern education in Ethiopia is largely associated with the intervention of foreign advisors and teachers who also played a salient role in influencing the medium of instruction in use. For instance, during the Menilik II period (1906-1935), French was used as a medium of instruction while Amharic and other international languages were taught as subjects. During the Italian occupation (1936-1941), in addition to Italian, local languages such as Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrigna, Arabic, Somali and Harari were used as mediums of instruction. During the Haile Selassie I time (1942-1952), English served as a medium of instruction while Amharic was taught as a subject and a medium of instruction for lower grades (Grade 1-4). In later developments (1952-1974), however, Amharic served as a medium of instruction in teaching elementary school children while English was used as a medium of instruction for secondary and higher education ladders. During the Derg Regime (1974-1991), Amharic was retained to serve as a medium of instruction for elementary school; while English was also retained to be used as a medium of instruction for secondary and higher education ladders. This being the case, however, during the Derg regime, 15 nationality languages were introduced to facilitate the well-known literacy campaigns [2], [3]. In addition, these languages were transcribed into

Geez script. Though the Derg regime stated in the “1974 Objectives and Directives of Education” a plan to introduce other nationality languages as a medium of instruction in Ethiopian primary schools, the efforts made were not successful. After the downfall of the Derg regime in 1991, a number of nationality languages (e.g. Tigrigna, Afan Oromo, Sidamigna, Somali, Wolaytigna) were introduced as a medium of instruction for primary schools. However, Amharic remained as a medium of instruction for primary schools in Amhara regional state and Addis Ababa City Administration. It was also offered as a subject of study in other regional states starting from earlier grades. Nevertheless, English continued to serve as a medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. In addition to the use of nationality languages, the script of writing for the newly introduced languages (Afan Oromo, Sidamigna, Somali and Wolaytigna) was changed from Geez to Latin [2]. From this brief historical account, it is vivid that the choice and use of medium of instruction were influenced by the existing political system and Ethiopia’s foreign relations policies. It is interesting to note that rather than the existing socio-cultural realities of the society, the adoption of a monolingual or multilingual language policy was dependent on the existing political system. A similar voice was echoed by Getachew and Derib [12]. They argued that “the various governments that ruled Ethiopia since the reign of Emperor Tewodros II followed various language use policies that suit their political orientation. The proposed and implemented language policies failed to address the socioeconomic and socio-cultural development needs and interests of the wider society”.

Nevertheless, the choice and use of medium of instruction in Ethiopia were and still remain a much-contested policy area. It appears that the choice of language policy is captured as a continuous struggle between those who favored “one unitary language of medium of instruction” and between those who called for the adoption of a “multilingual medium of instruction” in primary schools. For instance, scholars favoring the use of “one unitary language” criticized the attempt made to introduce various languages as a medium of instruction during the Italian occupation period [1-3]. They argued that the introduction of Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, Arabic, Somali and Harari languages as a medium of instruction was a mechanism used by Italians to divide the nation and to extend their occupation. These scholars also lauded Haile Selassie I’s effort to dismantle the multilingual instruction policy briefly used during the Italian occupation period and put back Amharic as a medium of instruction for elementary school. They cited factors such as the growing sense of nationalism, increased number of primary school enrollments and increased cost of hiring expatriate teachers exacerbated the need to use Amharic as a medium of instruction at the elementary level [1-2]. Given the nature of the existing Fascist and oppressive rule, their argument seems to hold some truth in it; however, limiting it only to such a claim poses some questions regarding the

objectivity of the assessment made regarding the then political, social, cultural and linguistic reality of Ethiopia. Their argument failed to assess the driving socio-cultural forces that made Italians introduce these languages into the education system. Besides, their argument lacked objectivity in providing evidence on the merits and demerits of using these languages in the education system. It can be argued rather differently that had Ethiopia continued to use these newly introduced nationality languages as a medium of instruction after the Italian occupation period was over, it might have contributed to the development of numerous nationality languages, improved literacy rate, minimized overdependence on foreign languages and harness Ethiopia’s unity.

Similarly, Ayalew [1-2] and Alemu and Tekleselassie [3] argued that the failure of the Derg regime to successfully implement the “1974 Objectives and Directives of Education” was attributed to perceived increased costs, scarcity of teachers, text books, teaching materials and the impact it may have on national integration and unity of Ethiopia. Though these reasons seem to play their part, the major reason seems to be rooted in the then-political ideology adhered to by the ruling elites. These elites consider any attempt to introduce a multilingual educational policy as an effort to undermine the unity and sovereignty of Ethiopia. Besides, the implementation of a monolingual, mono cultural and centralized educational system best serves the successful implementation of the longstanding assimilation policy in place. It is not coincidental the continued struggle of the Oromo, Tigrinya, Sidama, Somali and other nationalities in Ethiopia, which led to the downfall of the Derg regime in 1991, is largely associated with the right to self-determination and the freedom to develop and use their own languages and cultures [13]. It can be argued that the provisions stated in the 1991 Charter, the 1994 Constitution, and in the 1994 Education and Training Policy were an attempt to address the existing grievances. These provisions clearly outlined the right of all nations and nationalities to self-rule; to develop, nurture and use their cultural and linguistic heritages. As a result of these provisions, after 1991, a number of nationality languages (e.g. Tigrigna, Afan Oromo, Sidama, Somali, Wolayta) were introduced as a medium of instruction for primary schools. Besides, the efforts made to change the Geez script used in writing the newly introduced languages into Latin letters were made due to the limitation of Geez scripts in addressing the writing systems of these languages [2]. The phoneme-based writing system was considered to be more relevant than the alpha syllabic writing system [14]. It is surprising to note that while the existing scholarly debate revolved around the use of a single unitary or diverse language in the instructional process at the primary education level, little has been said or argued for or against the use of English as a medium of instruction both for secondary and higher education levels of the education system. In fact, Amlaku [15] argued the dominance of the

use of the English language over any local languages both in the education and business sectors. In this regard, English had been and still is taught as a subject from grade one and is a medium of instruction from grade nine, in some regional states from grade seven, through colleges and universities [7]. This shows the heavy importance policy makers placed on English language as a medium of instruction [16]. Solomon and Daniel [17] found a mismatch between the perception attached to the importance of English as a medium of instruction and student achievement. Their study observed that students' achievement and teachers' English language competence varied despite the associated value regarding English language for later educational attainment and career development.

### **3.2. Policy Intentions and Strategic Provisions for Language in Ethiopian Educational System**

It can be argued, that until 1994, there were no formally written language policy that guided the selection and use of language as a medium of instruction in Ethiopia [12]. In practice and implicitly, however, the revised 1955 Constitution of emperor Haile Selassie I and the 1974 Objectives and Directives of Education of the Derg regime stated the use of Amharic as a medium of instruction at elementary grade levels [38]. Therefore, Amharic remained the main instructional language that was used in the Ethiopian education system. The 1991 Charter can be said to have laid the foundation for the language policy adopted in Ethiopian education system since 1991. This Charter stated provisions that ensured all nations and nationalities of Ethiopia the right to develop their history, culture and use, promote and develop their own languages [2], [12]. Extending this provision, the 1994 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution [9] laid the legal ground for using its own language in education, administration and business. Article 5 of the constitution ensured the equal status of all languages spoken in Ethiopia. While maintaining Amharic as the working language of the Federal Government, Regional States were given the freedom to use the language they chose for education and administration purposes [9].

Derived from these provisions, the 1994 Education and Training Policy stipulated the use of nationality languages as the medium of instruction for primary schools. In addition to ensuring the rights of the people, the policy argued the pedagogical relevance of using the mother tongue in early grade instruction [5]. In addition, the policy encouraged learning additional local languages that are widely spoken in neighboring regions. In doing so, the policy ensured all nationalities the right to choose from among the available languages in their localities to be used as a medium of instruction. Nevertheless, the policy reinforced the teaching of Amharic language as a subject in all corners of the country. This was considered pivotal to promoting country wide communication and integration.

Accordingly, Amharic continued to be used as a medium of instruction in areas where the mother tongue is Amharic with the commencement of Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, Sidamigna and Wolaytigna languages as a medium of instruction in areas where these languages are widely spoken. Apart from this, the policy advocated the teaching of English as a subject starting from grade one, and as a medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. English language was and still is considered highly essential to promote internationalization and inter cultural relations [5], [7].

In order to strengthen the effort, the policy outlined the need for more studies to be carried out on the use of other nationalities and minority languages (e.g., Guragigna, Hadiyya, Dawuro, Agewigna etc.) as a medium of instruction for primary education. Consequently, up until 2015 more than 22 nationality languages were introduced to serve as a medium of instruction for lower and upper primary school levels [18]. The remainder educational ladder was left to be taught using English as a medium of instruction. Moreover, the policy set a direction for the use of local languages in training preprimary and primary school teachers [5]. It also declared the provision of resources to strengthen language teaching at all levels. This policy direction contributed to the introduction of three vernacular languages as a medium of instruction in teacher training institutes and as a subject in higher education [19].

From the 1994 Education and Training Policy provisions, it can be purported that three rationales drove the language policy development. The first rationale emanated from respecting and upholding the right of the nations and nationalities to use, promote and develop their own language and culture. This rationale is rooted in the central theme of the 1991 Charter, which served as a benchmark in promulgating the 1994 FDRE Constitution that gave equal status for all languages, ensured the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia with the right to self-rule, and govern themselves. Besides, the 2003 cultural policy of Ethiopia reiterated the equality of all languages and advocated for the provision of all the necessary resources to ensure their growth and development [39]. This policy was also intended to promote research on the existing languages, oral literature and traditions. Hence, promoting cultural pluralism, inclusion and integration was considered essential in fostering the social, cultural and economic development of the country. The second rationale is rooted in the pedagogical assumption that teaching children with their own mother tongue promotes students' mastery of reading, writing, arithmetic and reasoning abilities. In addition, it was assumed that using vernacular language in instructional process gives the students the satisfaction from their educational experience [4]. Such enjoyment was also considered pivotal to developing students' positive self-esteem, identity, creativity and motivation in learning [20]. However, the policy's rationale to use English as the sole medium of

instruction for secondary and higher education remains unexplained. Covertly however, it seems to be emanated from the idea of promoting international understanding and intercultural exchange between Ethiopia and the rest of the world. In addition, there is a wider perception among teachers, students and parents that the use of English as a medium of instruction contributes to later educational attainment and career advancement within Ethiopia and abroad [17]. Therefore, promoting global understanding and enhancing Ethiopia's competitiveness in world politics and economy can be regarded as the third rationale that laid the ground for the formulation of the policy. Given the longstanding political struggle made by various ethnic groups for equality and justice the adoption of a multilingual language policy seems to be appropriate and logical. The recently adopted revised Education and Training Policy seems to continue with the multilingual language policy with minor changes. In the policy document the following is stated:

*Students will learn at least three languages; Mother tongue language will be taught as a subject and is used as a medium of instruction in preprimary and primary education. Regional states will decide on the grade level at which the teaching and use of mother tongue will be discontinued. English language will be taught as a subject starting from grade 1 and will be used as a medium of instruction from grade 9 onwards. However, regional states will decide on the grade level at which its use as a medium of instruction will commence. In cumbent up on students/parents' choice, students can choose and learn one local language from among the Federal working languages from grade 3 to grade 10. One foreign language will be taught as an eclectic subject starting from grade 9. Regular technical and vocational training will be taught in English, while short and community-oriented trainings will be taught based on the interest of the trainee [7].*

Different from the 1994 policy, the revised one did not vividly state Amharic as a subject that will be taught across the country. Besides, decisions pertaining to the use of English as an instructional language at junior secondary school were left to regional states. Moreover, the policy gave students and parents the right to choose and learn additional local and foreign languages. It can be argued, that the policy direction reaffirmed a multilingual language policy that seeks to promote linguistic and cultural plurality and diversity in Ethiopia.

Since the development of the 1994 Education and Training Policy, six consecutive Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP I-VI, 1997-2025) were implemented [18], [21-25]. In addition, in collaboration with the World Bank, General Education Quality Improvement Programs (GEQIP I & II) were launched and under implementation since 2009 [18]. These strategic and programmatic initiatives were aimed at delivering the

promises of the education policy through providing an action plan to improve education access, equity, relevance and quality at all levels [6]. One of the improvement areas identified in some of the strategic programs was improving the medium of instruction used at all levels of the education system. Of all the strategic provisions, the first ESDP (1998-2002) clearly stated the *use of local languages i.e., mother tongue* in primary grades [21]. The principal reasons cited included enhancing students' integration with the school environment, matching students' funds of knowledge with schoolwork, improve the quality of student's learning experience and achievement. At that point in time, 19 languages were introduced as a medium of primary school instruction with more languages planned to be introduced soon after. The strategic document was also cautious of the additional cost that introducing additional local languages requires and therefore, recommended the importance of weighing its value against the policy premises. So far, more than 22 mother tongue languages are used as a medium of instruction in preprimary, primary and middle schools. Another noticeable strategic provision regarding language of instruction was related to ESDP III's (2005-2010) and GEQIP I's (2009-2013) significant investment in the development of English language proficiency of primary and secondary school teachers. As part of their professional development, English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) was introduced in 2006 and continued to be implemented to date. This program benefited more than 15, 000 teachers [24]. Other than these provisions, the subsequent ESDPs did not stress on medium of instruction. Rather, more emphasis was placed on the consolidation of expanding education at all levels, producing qualified teachers, ensuring the provision of educational materials and financial resources and addressing various crosscutting issues.

In an attempt to address quality, access, equity and relevance related problems faced by the education system, the Education Development Road Map was developed [6]. The recommendations of this research-based document were used in formulating the 2023 revised Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia. In this document, the impact of language of instruction on students' learning and the quality of education is discussed to some extent. This document enumerated that one of the challenges facing primary school education is students' level of language acquisition and proficiency in both their mother tongue and English. In order to address these challenges, the document recommended bilingual education i.e., the use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction and one more local language as a subject starting from Grade 1. The choice for the additional language was left to parents and children. In addition, Amharic as the Federal working language was recommended to be taught starting from Grade 3. Moreover, teaching English as a subject starting from Grade 1 and using it as a language of instruction starting from Grade 7 was recommended. The

recommendations forwarded also prioritized the acquisition of essential communicative skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). Most importantly, improving teachers' language proficiency (local and English languages) and providing the necessary educational resources was considered pivotal to addressing the challenges facing the quality of primary education instruction [6].

The multilingual language policy adopted in the 2023 revised Education and Training Policy and the Six Education Sector Development Program endorsed the recommendation of the Education Development Roadmap with minor changes. Similar to the recommendation, these policy and strategic documents emphasized the development of multilingual proficiency in primary and secondary education. Accordingly, proficiency and competence in “*the mother tongue, the national communication official language(s), interregional language(s), and English*” is highly emphasized [7], [25]. It also created a favorable environment for regional states and city administrations to teach languages that are dominantly used in neighboring regions. This is considered to boost mutual understanding, respect, cooperation and smooth relationships between and among various competing ethnicities and cultures. Therefore, the use of multiple and diverse languages as a medium of instruction seems to continue to shape Ethiopian instructional language policy.

### 3.3. Theoretical Perspectives on Ethiopian Education Language Policy

The existence of multiple and complex explanatory variables makes finding a single comprehensive theory that lucidly explains the political and socio-cultural rationale for the selection and use of instructional language. Similarly, the complexities involved in a given language make it challenging to come up with one overarching theory that explains why certain language policies are prioritized [26]. This being the case, however, various authors discussed the major theories or models of language policy. In this paper, the seminal works of Thomas Ricento [26], Bernard Spolsky [27-28], Patten [29] and Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas [30] were reviewed to shed light on the existing discussions on the theoretical foundations of language policy and language planning. The brief account of these theories and models is presented as follows.

#### 3.3.1. Thomas Ricento's localized and domain-centered theory of language policy

Ricento [26] proposed various approaches to understand why and how language policies are formulated. His discussion focused explicitly on theory and method in the academic study of language policy/planning through adopting an interdisciplinary approach to language policy. Because of the existence of multi-layered societal and contextual factors [31] that shape language policies, his

theory called for the following models or constructs useful in understanding how language and language policy affect a given society. Based on the work of Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas [30], Ricento [26] discussed the following major models discussed in language policies:

*Linguistic imperialism*: this model attempts to explain how the languages of colonial powers affected the development of indigenous languages. As an example, the theory discusses the role of English, French and other languages in promoting economic exploitation and changing the political, social, cultural and educational landscape of various colonies. Advocates of this model hold that linguistic imperialism played a salient role in deterring the growth of indigenous languages in the developing nations and promoted cultural homogenization. Other researchers, however, objected to this view indicating the role the English language played in the opposition made over the colonial rule in South Africa and in inculcating nationalist ideologies in Sri Lanka.

*Language rights or linguistic human rights*: this model was propounded as an attempt to suppress the impact of imperialist languages on the growth and improvement of local or indigenous languages. This model asserted that learning and using one's native language is one of the basic human rights similitude to the individual's liberty to adhere to any religious beliefs, or the right to preserve and promote one's cultural symbols and heritages. Proponents of this model underscored the importance of the state in preserving and promoting local, indigenous and minority languages through careful planning and resourcing.

To Ricento, disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology, and psychology offer an important tool in evaluating the effectiveness of a certain language policy. These multidisciplinary lenses offer empirical data on language use, attitude and performance [32]. Through employing such a multidisciplinary approach, one can evaluate the cost and benefit of an existing language policy; and explore existing identity politics that give rise to language policy disputes and existence of different types of national identity. Based on the work of Patten [29], Getachew and Derib [12] discussed the following four models of language policy:

- i) *Disestablishment or public disengagement model*: this model claims that the various languages used in the country must be recognized on equal terms.
- ii) *Official multilingualism*: The model claims that the different languages which are spoken in a given country should be recognized as one.
- iii) *Language rationalization*: By denying recognition of other languages or restricting their inclusion, this model seeks to confer privilege on the publicly spoken language.
- iv) *Language maintenance*: This model aims to achieve the same results in all languages. This entails equal recognition and resourcing of all languages spoken in a given country.

Patten's models offered a very good explanation as to why certain languages dominate or are being undermined in educational, administrative and commercial endeavors of a given nation.

### 3.3.2. Bernard Spolsky's national language policy theory

According to Spolsky [27], [28] language policy making may take place at different levels beginning from family through to the national level and beyond. It can also range from school, and work to nations domain. In addition, language policy interacts and is influenced by a variety of social, economic and political factors [33]. Based on Spolsky's [27] work, Albury [34] discussed four crucial factors that have a bearing in shaping a nation's language policy:

- i) *National or ethnic ideology or claims of identity*: refers to the frameworks of beliefs and principles important for a common perception that can manifest themselves in language policies.
- ii) *The role of English as a global language*: refers to the rise of English as an imperial language and its role in becoming a measure of global social and economic mobility.
- iii) *A nation's sociolinguistic situation*: refers to the landscape of languages spoken in a given country and their communicative values and existing perceptions within and out of the community being studied.
- iv) *An increasing interest in the rights of linguistic minorities*: refers to the increased importance attached to encouraging linguistic pluralism in policy settings and the growing appreciation for respecting and protecting individuals' and groups' right to use, learn and develop their own languages including minority, indigenous and local languages.

Accordingly, the type and nature of language policy adopted within a given country reflect the interaction of these and other related forces. In addition to these factors, Albury [34] and Simpson [33] discussed three essential interrelated processes identified by Spolsky in envisaging language policy:

- a) *Language planning or management*: refers to intentionally making efforts to alter or shape the existing practice through formulating clear language policies. This process emphasizes how authorities can regulate language through promulgating legislation, regulations and official programs.
- b) *Language belief or ideology*: refers to the beliefs held by a given community about language and its use. The beliefs and assumptions held about a language are assumed to be the product of the intricate social, political and cultural realities existing within the community.
- c) *Language practice*: refers to the usual pattern of selection among the varieties that make up its

language repertoire. It concerns the real use of language in a language environment.

These procedures also relate to the perception and practice of those affected by language policies in force. Consequently, in the policy practice and management of a language there is a significant influence on ideological beliefs as to its importance and status. It should be noted that language policies are often implicit, which means they can best be detected by examination of practice rather than on the basis of formal documentation [27], [28], [34]. Therefore, what is apparent in the policy documents may not necessarily reflect the existing practices.

From the theoretical discussions, the notion propounded in linguistic imperialism and language rights seems to reflect the central theme of discussions on Ethiopia's language policy since 1991. The adoption of a language policy that made "Amharic language" the sole language used in primary education and public services across the country was heavily criticized for the role the policy played in hindering the development of various languages (e.g., Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, Somali, Afar, Sidama, Wolayta etc.). Most importantly, as an imperial language, Amharic was used to promote cultural homogenization and an assimilation strategy. Similarly, the adoption of a language policy that attempted to suppress the influence of the Amharic language and promote the development of numerous indigenous languages [5-7] seems to be influenced by the notion of linguistic human rights. Careful planning and resourcing both by the federal and regional governments reflect the attention given to the protection and promotion of local, indigenous and minority languages. Moreover, the recent discourse on the adoption of official multilingualism model reflects the effort made to address the long-awaited quest of various nations and nationalities of Ethiopia to get similar recognition for their languages.

### 3.4. Empirical Insights in to the Medium of Instruction in Ethiopian Education System

Since the introduction of the 1994 language policy, policy makers, researchers, and practitioners have carried out a number of studies and review works to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the policies in place. To shed light on the achievements and pitfalls of the policy, a few of these studies are reviewed and incorporated briefly as follows.

For starters, Bloor and Tamrat [13] investigated various issues related to the language policy in the Ethiopian education system. Their evaluative appraisal study attempted to give an overview of the number of languages that are used in Ethiopia, both local and international, as well as take a short look at their historic contribution to education. Though their review appreciated the government's effort to introduce nationality languages in the instructional process, they identified the difficulties

associated with implementing such a diversified vernacular language policy. Given the pluralistic nature of the Ethiopian population, the first difficulty they raised was the problem of providing instruction in vernacular languages for every child. No matter how the government tried, there were children who had to learn another language than their native. The second problem they pinpointed was associated with the swift approach the government used to introduce mother tongue instruction with fewer opportunities given for the societies to engage in policy dialogues and decisions. According to the authors, this undermined the importance of careful planning and widening societal acceptance. The third challenge was raised on the shortage of qualified teachers, teaching materials in the mother tongue and the problems created by hastily translated teaching materials and the scripts selected for some vernacular languages.

Another noticeable work that focused on examining the political dimension of the language policy which was adopted in 1994 was that of Alemu and Tekleselassie [3]. Their study focused on assessing whether or not the instructional language policy was developed to achieve political motives or the learning needs and interests of children. In so doing, they attempted to explain the formulation, implementation, and outcome of Ethiopia's instructional language policy in light of the PRINCE system of power analysis. Prince is one of the methods used for predicting the probability of whether or not a specific public policy will be implemented. It also provides a methodology to assess the degree of support or opposition from individuals, groups and organizations to any particular policy [37]. Their analysis revealed that the execution of the language policy faced challenges associated with a lack of consulting on the real interest of ethnic minorities whose languages were under represented in the instructional process. They also felt that the implementation was carried out without proper planning, adequate teaching materials and consideration for additional costs and children's learning needs. In addition, they attributed the low achievement of ethnic minority students, among others, on the limitations of the language policy introduced. The authors concluded, that political drives rather than the genuine needs of the children and the community had a role in the language policy's adoption.

Similarly, Aschalew [4] assessed Ethiopian education language policy and its practices after 1991. Accordingly, the author offered a detailed account of the shift observed in the political, educational and language policy of Ethiopia after 1994. The author also discussed the justification for instructing students in their native tongue. Using the mother tongue in the instructional process plays a tremendous role in helping children to develop self-identity, understand and construct meaning easily, enhance their productivity, and promote the development of the language and its associated cultures. The author argued, that the difficulties in putting the language policy into practice stem from improper implementation in the

major cities where multilingual populations exist but are forced to learn in the official language (Amharic) at the primary level. In addition, the author raised various factors that contributed to the observed disparity between regions in using mother tongue instruction. Interestingly, the author identified a lack of appropriate orthographies and scripts for minority languages, a lack of qualified teachers and educational resources, lack of community participation in language planning as some of the challenges hindering the effective implementation of the language policy.

Apart from this, Záhofík and Teshome [8] looked at the case studies and theoretical underpinnings that are crucial for a thorough examination of Ethiopian language policy. Based on their extensive review, they concluded that there still remains a reality that, in a nation characterized by linguistic plurality, Amharic is the lingua franca in Ethiopia. The existence of numerous widely spoken languages such as Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, Sidamigna and Somali will continue to challenge this reality. In addition, they argued that given the emphasis laid on English as a subject of study and a medium of instruction, they forecasted the increased role English language would play in Ethiopian schools and education system in the future.

On the other hand, Heugh et al. [35] studied the instructional language used in Ethiopian primary schools and its role in student's learning achievement. The authors used students' achievement data from the 2000 and 2004 Grade 8 National Learning Assessment results. According to their research, in 2000, students who received instruction in English instead of their mother tongues (e.g., Afan Oromo, Amharic, or Tigrigna) achieved lower mean scores in Grade 8 biology, chemistry, and mathematics subjects. The 2004 Grade 8 National Learning Assessments, report also favored students who received instruction in their mother tongues as compared to those who were taught in English. The study rated the mother tongue policy in place as some of the finest on the continent and valued its role in supporting sound educational practice.

Similarly, Ramachandran [36] studied the influence of introducing mother tongue instruction on the mean years of primary schools in Ethiopia. Data from the 2011 Demographic and Health Survey were analyzed in the study. A nationally representative sample from each of Ethiopia's nine regions and two city administrations was included in the study. The comparative study used two cohorts: cohorts of children aged 2–7 in 1994 in Amhara, Dire Dawa, Harari and Oromia with Afan Oromo language background and being taught through their mother tongue after 1994, and children aged 13–20 in 1994 with Amharic language background. According to the study, children with an Afan Oromo linguistic background and who received instruction using mother tongue spend 0.75–1.0 years more time in primary school, with reduced dropout and greater completion rates being the main causes of this gain. Therefore, mother tongue instruction seems to contribute to lower repetition and



increased completion rate in primary schooling.

In addition, Vujich [20] examined the findings obtained from the 2010 Young Lives School survey. Using qualitative and quantitative approaches, the survey attempted to explore the advantages and difficulties of using mother tongue instruction in Ethiopian context. The finding indicated that 52% of urban and 76% of rural schoolteachers strongly supported some degree of teaching children in their mother tongue. The survey's results showed teachers' positive view of mother tongue instruction. They considered it a crucial tool to facilitate students' comprehension skills and to create a welcoming environment where students feel free to ask questions and interact with the teacher. In addition, the study came up with a finding that suggested teachers' tendency to revert to using their mother tongue, even where the official medium of instruction was English. This being the case, however, the findings from the survey also indicated teacher's preference to change the language of instruction from their mother tongue to English in primary school education. Their reason is to help cope children better with the English language challenges they face in secondary education. The author opposed this claim indicating that with mother tongue education still in place, students can be competent in English so long as skilled and competent English language teachers facilitate the instructional process.

Moreover, UNICEF [19] conducted a regional wide assessment of the impact of language policy and practice on children's learning. The succinct evidence reports from Ethiopia covered the historical evolution of language policy and supported the notion that multilingual education professionals generally see Ethiopia's mother tongue instruction policy as the most progressive national policy environment in Africa. By citing a variety of studies, the report tried to clarify how teaching children in their mother tongue language may support their learning and academic success. This being the case, however, the report noted some practical challenges that are impeding the successful implementation of the policy.

The few reviews and empirical evidence consulted so far revealed mixed findings. On the one hand, some evidences suggested the contribution of mother tongue instruction policy in improving students' completion rate, learning gains and achievement. On the other hand, some evidences suggested lower student's learning and achievement particularly for students from minority languages in regions and city administration characterized by the existence of diverse vernacular languages. The other contrasting argument presented in the reviewed studies is on the contribution of the 1994 language policy in promoting Ethiopia's unity and national cohesion. While there are sufficient arguments on the positive outcomes of the multilingual language policy in areas such as the development of student's identity, enhancing instructional relevance, meaning formation, cultural and linguistic heritages, there are counter arguments on the

effect of this policy in undermining Ethiopia's unity, social cohesion and integration. This being the case, however, the review and empirical studies reflected several challenges that impacted the policy's effective execution. These challenges ranged from a lack of properly participation from the concerted community members in language planning, to placing minority students in teaching environments that solely use instructional language other than their native. Besides, the lack of selecting a proper writing script for the newly introduced nationality languages, and shortage of teaching materials and qualified teachers also influenced the successful implementation of the policy. Though this paper acknowledges the importance of the factors discussed in influencing Ethiopia's mother tongue language policy, it also cautions against the generalizations made by different authors without extensive empirical evidence. In fact, compared to the review literature, the empirical studies seem to report a positive outcome of using mother tongue instructional policies in Ethiopia. Limitations were only discussed from the way the language policy was implemented rather than questioning or suggesting otherwise on the rationales or philosophical underpinnings behind formulating such policy. Therefore, the counter arguments made need to be supplemented by results from empirical studies. Without convincing empirical support, arguing against the multilingual language policy that enjoyed wider societal acceptance seems to raise no water. Nevertheless, the limitation of studies on the pros and cons of the language policy implemented since 1991 opens the avenue for further studies. This will provide baseline data for future policy suggestions and improvements.

### **3.5. The Dynamics of Language Policies in Ethiopia**

Language policies do not emerge or operate in a vacuum. Rather, their formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation operate within competing and challenging sets of dynamism. Understanding these policy dynamics helps understand why certain language policies emerge, change and persist in given circumstances. The 1994 and the 2023 revised instructional language policies of Ethiopia can be scrutinized from political, socio-cultural, economic and global dynamics.

#### **3.5.1. Political dynamic**

Politics remained one of the fundamental forces that shaped and influenced the daily lives of Ethiopians including the education sector [3]. The political ideology espoused and the resulting governance and structural arrangements adopted seem to exert significant influence on the language policy of Ethiopia. One may contend that imperialism, colonialism, socialism and capitalist political philosophy played a salient role in determining, among others, the language policy of Ethiopia. The adoption of Amharic as the sole language of instruction during the

imperial and the Derg regimes and the adoption of numerous nationality languages as a medium of instruction after the downfall of the Derg is largely attributed to the differences in the political ideology and governance structures of the times. In addition to this, international politics and relations, globalization and regionalization also shaped Ethiopia's education language policy. The use of French, Arabic, Italian (During Menelik II and Italian occupation period) and English (starting from Haile Selassie I time to date) as a subject and a language of instruction either at primary, middle school, secondary and higher education levels is a testimonial to the role international relations and politics played in shaping the Ethiopian language policy.

### 3.5.2. Social dynamic

The existing societal characteristics of Ethiopia also influenced the formulation, adoption and implementation of language policy in Ethiopia. Multi ethnic and linguistically diversified population characterizes Ethiopian society. Though such diversity can be considered as Ethiopia's strength, it also contributed to a longstanding tension, conflicts and struggles between competing ethnic groups and cultures. One area of such struggle was guaranteeing the freedom to use one's native tongue in administrative and educational settings. In this regard, two dominant policy stances and arguments circulated the decision of instructional language policy. The struggle was and still is between those who favored the use of "Amharic" as a lingua franca of educational and administrative system and between those who favored the use of multi-ethnic languages for educational and administrative purposes. While those who advocated for a unitary language of instruction argued its role in promoting Ethiopia's unity and national integration, those who are in favor of the use of diverse nationality languages or mother tongue instruction argued indifferently. They critiqued the adoption of the unitary language policy as another form of oppression and a tool used in the quest to assimilate Ethiopian society under the dominance of Amhara leadership and governance. No matter what the arguments, the sole reliance on using Amharic as a language of instruction (e.g., During Haile Selassie I and the Derg regimes) contributed to its literary development while also contributing to the underrepresentation and underdevelopment of other nationality languages that are widely spoken in the country.

Since, the introduction of the 1994 language policy, however, a number of nationality languages have been introduced as a subject or as a language of instruction in primary schools. Though such an attempt delivered the promises of the 1994 Constitution and played a salient role in nurturing and developing the languages of various ethnic groups, the policy is suffering from a number of implementation challenges which is serving as counterproductive. It is worth stating that despite all the efforts made to realize the effective implementation of the

language policy through improving the qualification of teachers, the existing curriculum, provision of textbooks and teaching materials at all levels, students' learning achievement and the quality of education at all levels remained poor even deteriorated in some regions [18], [24]. One of the issues facing primary education, according to the Education Development Roadmap [6], is the degree of linguistic skills attainment and competency in both the native and English languages. This document cited a few study reports that revealed students' lack of basic reading and writing skills either in their mother tongue (Nationality Languages), Amharic (working language) and English, a language of instruction in secondary schools and higher educational settings [6], [7], [25].

### 3.5.3. Cultural dynamic

The quest for cultural pluralism and the freedom to use, advance and inculcate one's cultural, traditional and linguistic heritages in education and other development avenues was one of the pillars of the longstanding struggles made in Ethiopia. The dominance of Semitic culture, the Amhara language, culture and traditions in particular, and the underrepresentation of other Semitic, Cushitic, Nilo-Saharan and Omotic peoples' linguistic and cultural heritages in the educational, cultural and political setting of the nation were one of the battlegrounds for politicians, educators and linguists. In a nation characterized by diverse ethnic groups, with more than 80 languages widely spoken, the adoption of a language policy that reinforced the use of Amharic in primary education instructional processes seems to contribute to the marginalization of various languages, cultures and traditional heritages from school environment. Due to the mono lingual policy, students whose native tongue was not Amharic were compelled to learn in a language that was fundamentally different from their own. This made mastering crucial linguistic skills, constructing meaning, forming identity and relating learning with their day-to-day life challenging [5]. To address these challenges, the 1994 Constitution [9] granted equal status to all cultures and languages existing in Ethiopia. In addition, the 1994 instructional language policy [3] and the subsequent education sector strategies [21-25] introduced numerous languages to be utilized in the primary school instruction. Nevertheless, not all languages were represented in primary school instructional process. A considerable number of minority students in some regions and in major cities still receive primary education in a language other than their own. This is contributing to poor students' achievement and learning gains since the schools are failing to satisfy the learning needs of minority students coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

### 3.5.4. Economic dynamic

As one of the world's least developed nations, Ethiopia encountered several obstacles in realizing the main goals of its educational policies, strategies and programs.

Characterized by a backward agriculture centered economy, chronic poverty, poor school infrastructure, and shortage of educational resources (e.g., textbooks, instructional materials, motivated and competent teachers and administrators), the country faced tremendous challenges to realize the goals of the ambitious language policy. Since the adoption of the 1994 Education and Training policy, over 22 languages have been introduced as a medium of instruction in primary education. The cost of translating textbooks, training teachers in mother tongue instruction and building schools that accommodate the needs of linguistically diverse students was beyond Ethiopia's economic capability. As a result, millions of children are still forced to attend their primary education in languages other than their native. This, among others, is contributing to student's poor learning gains and academic achievement. Besides, it limited the policy's ability to meet the goals of ensuring educational relevance and equity in the country [7].

#### 3.5.5. Global dynamics

From the outset, global dynamics such as international relations, colonialism, the UN declaration of universal human rights, the global commitment to Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) played a salient role in influencing Ethiopia's education policy in general and of the language policy in particular. It can be argued that the derive to introduce numerous nationality languages in primary school instruction was an attempt made to ensure and respect the right of children to use their native language and a commitment to ensure educational equity and quality. In addition, the heavy reliance of secondary and higher education system on the use of English both as an academic and scholarship language is a testimonial to the influence of globalization and internationalization.

## 4. Conclusions

From the preceding discussion it can be concluded that instructional language policy in Ethiopia remained an area of contest among various competing perspectives. The battle between the assimilationists (those who advocate for the adoption of a single unitary instructional language policy) and multilinguals (those who advocate for the adoption of diverse multilingual instructional language policies) will continue to persist due to three reasons. First, the existence of diverse social, cultural and political interests in Ethiopia will continue to influence the instructional language policy adopted. Second, global dynamics such as the impact of English language in global market and politics will continue to shape the selection and utilization of English at secondary and tertiary levels of the education system. Third, a lack of willingness among policy makers to properly address the existing instructional language policy and strategic problems will also continue

to impact the quality of the instructional process, and students' rate of learning and achievement.

Nevertheless, the attempt made by Addis Ababa City Administration to adopt a pragmatic approach to instructional language policy might serve as a platform to bridge the two polar perspectives that are continuing to impact the instructional language policy of Ethiopia. From our perspective, policy decisions on instructional language need to consider the wider socio-cultural, economic and political realities of the society for which the policy is purported to serve. Ethiopia is characterized by linguistic diversity, with multiple languages spoken within the country. Adopting a flexible instructional language policy and strategy that suits the linguistic background of children is instrumental in improving literacy and communication skills. Apart from this, adopting an instructional language policy that is responsive to the global market needs is also essential to improve students' competitiveness and intercultural skills.

## 5. Recommendations for Future Actions

The result of the preceding discussions implies a number of things, which calls for some recommendations to be made. Hereunder are the recommendations for future actions.

### 5.1. Policy Development

The existing educational language policy of Ethiopia for primary education still has relevance to the existing political, socio-cultural and economic realities of the nation. In a society characterized by diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, promoting mother tongue instructional policy contributes to the effort the country is making to ensure equity and fairness in the education system. However, the use of English as the sole language of instruction for secondary and higher education (HE) needs to be revisited. Such policy contributes to the under development of local as well as indigenous languages, and cultures and increases the skilled labor drain. The global move toward adopting a bilingual or multilingual or parallelingual language policy in HE is a testimonial to the effort these countries are making to minimize the impact of using English as a lingua franca. Therefore, future policy discourses need to focus on devising clear strategies and carefully planning on introducing local languages as an instructional language option for secondary and higher education students.

### 5.2. Quality of Education

The language policy in use contributes to education quality. It plays a tremendous role in enhancing student's learning, achievement and educational outcomes.

Language is an important tool through which teachers transfer, share, transact and communicate facts, principles, theories and experiences with their students. Students' level of understanding, meaning creation, acquisition of fundamental knowledge, skills and perceptions rests on the level of their engagement and interaction with objects, people, and the external environment. The use of mother tongue instruction assists in achieving these pertinent outcomes. Empirical evidence indicates that most secondary and HE students and instructors are not competent enough to communicate in English [6], [25]. Often than not, instructors switch the language of instruction from English either to the working language (Amharic) or to student's mother tongue in order to make the instruction meaningful. This is contributing, among others, to the lower students' learning gains and achievement of outcomes at secondary and HE levels. The lower achievement at primary schools seems to be related, as empirical and policy documents suggested, to teaching minority students using their secondary languages, poor instructional quality, shortage of instructional resources and school infrastructures. Therefore, the country's trickled quality of education would be improved if future policy decisions consider introducing bilingual or paralelingual mediums of instruction and intensive language improvement programs both for the mother tongue and English languages.

### 5.3. Teaching and Learning

Communication and instruction are inseparable. The quality of the teaching and learning process, among others, is influenced by the quality of the communication and interaction process. One of the most serious and explosive issues in Ethiopian education to date is meeting the educational needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in classrooms. The right of ethnic minorities to learn in their native language is not yet satisfactorily addressed at all levels of the education system. In primary schools, a considerable number of students are forced to learn in a language other than their own. Most of them spent much of their time and struggle trying to understand the facts, principles, concepts and experiences taught in the mainstream language. This limits children's ability to relate their existing funds of knowledge with classroom teaching and school environment. Besides, in secondary and Higher Education, students are taught solely in English or in a language they were not well prepared for their primary education. This all influences the quality of their interaction and engagement in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, future decisions on language policy need to value the importance of introducing culturally and linguistically sensitive pedagogy in the teaching and learning process.

### 5.4. Teachers' Professional Development

The implementation of any educational language policy is dependent on the competency level of teachers. Since 1994, teachers' professional development received considerable attention at all levels of the education system. A number of schemes and modalities have been introduced to capacitate teachers' subject matter, pedagogical and linguistic skills. This being the case, however, empirical as well as policy documents indicated that most teachers are short of satisfying the required subject matter and pedagogic skills and competencies. In particular, their communicative skills in secondary language and in English language skills are increasingly questioned. We would argue that, compared to the emphasis given to developing teachers' subject matter and pedagogical skills, the development of teachers' communicative and English language skills received lesser attention. Therefore, intensive secondary language competency development schemes need to be warranted for primary school teachers. In addition to English Language Improvement Program (ELIP), additional intensive English language competency development schemes ought to be provided for secondary and HE teachers. Apart from this, for students entering secondary school, intensive English language training needs to be provided to address future challenges.

### 5.5. Research

Available research and reviews on Ethiopian language policy seem to be skewed to one end of the spectrum. Those commissioned by the Ministry of Education tend to focus on assessing the implementation state of the language policy. These researches failed to raise critical questions on the rationale, distal and long-term consequences of the policy. Those researches undertaken for scholarly interest tended to focus more on the investigation of the rationale or philosophy of the language policy in place since 1994. Their fundamental question revolved around assessing the political base of the language policy rather than investigating the existing policy environment that led to the formulation of those policies. Rather than making language policy research a political discourse alone, future research endeavors on Ethiopia's language policy need to adopt a comprehensive approach that aims at investigating the macro, system, and institution level forces, options and challenges.

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