

Indigenous Languages as a Medium of Instruction in Public Primary Schools: Practices and Challenges in Gambella Regional State

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Abstract

The Ethiopia Education and Training Policy support the right of nations to use their native languages as a medium of instruction in primary education. However, its implementation in Gambella Regional State has faced challenges. This study aimed to explore the practices and challenges of using native languages in public primary schools. A descriptive survey design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, was used to analyze data from 80 randomly selected teachers through questionnaires, and 16 purposively selected principals and education experts through interviews. The findings indicated that while teachers had a positive attitude towards using native languages, they faced challenges in employing effective teaching methods and using appropriate teaching materials. Additionally, a lack of professional development and training for teachers, as well as insufficient instructional resources, were identified as major obstacles. These challenges hindered the successful implementation of native language instruction in Gambella's primary schools. The study recommends that school administrations and education offices at the Woreda, Zonal, and

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Regional levels take more proactive steps to address these issues and support teachers in making necessary improvements.

Keywords

Practice, Challenges, Native languages, Primary schools

1. Introduction

Language serves as a vital medium in the teaching and learning process, significantly influencing educational outcomes. To this fact, there are numerous studies (Hussein, 2017; Kefeyalew Namera, 2018; Abdurehman Talema, 2020; Bezabih and Tesfaye, 2020) highlight that the choice of language of instruction is a critical factor affecting educational effectiveness. Scholars emphasize the importance of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, arguing that students learn more effectively when taught in their native language (Abdurehman Talema, 2020). The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) affirms the right to education without discrimination based on language. The World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) highlight the necessity of quality education as essential for achieving “Education for All.” UNESCO emphasizes the importance of using a child's native language, especially in early education, as a fundamental aspect of their social, personal, and cultural identity.

The Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (1994) explicitly supports this notion, stating in Article 3.5 that primary education should be conducted in the languages of the nationalities, recognizing both the pedagogical benefits and the rights of various ethnic groups. This policy has facilitated the use of local languages in primary education across Ethiopia, allowing diverse nationalities to educate their children in their mother tongues. Such languages play a crucial role in conveying knowledge and concepts in the classroom (Bezabih and Tesfaye, 2020).

Scholars argue that mother tongue instruction is not only pedagogically beneficial but also a matter of children's rights (Tadesse Akalu, 2011). Research indicates that children achieve greater academic success when their education is rooted in their first language (Hussein Abdi, 2017). The researchers also contend that promoting mother tongue instruction offers significant pedagogical, social, political, economic, and psychological benefits.

However, challenges persist regarding language choice in education. Issues include the lack of written scripts for many indigenous languages, inadequacies in expressing modern scientific concepts, economic constraints, and concerns about national unity arising from

multilingual education (Alem, 2006). In response, various interventions and policies have been initiated at both national and international levels. For instance, the UN's declarations emphasize the link between language and cultural identity, advocating for educational structures that promote linguistic diversity (UNESCO, 2011).

Due to the focus on mother tongue instruction, over 38 of Ethiopia's 84 indigenous languages are now utilized in primary education (African Languages Conference, 2013). In the Gambella region, Anyua and Nuer have been used in primary schools since 1996, while Majang began in 2010. Existing studies, such as Buony Jock's (2017) work on Nuer language practices in Wanthoa Woreda and Tadesse Akalu's (2011) research on Anguak language implementation, are limited in scope. This indicates as there is a lack of comprehensive research evaluating the effectiveness of these languages in the educational context of Gambella. The current study seeks to address this gap by examining the practices and challenges of using Anywaa, Nuer, and Majang languages in Gambella's primary education and provide a holistic understanding of the current situation on the area. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are native languages practiced as mediums of instruction in primary schools in Gambella?
2. What challenges exist in implementing native languages as mediums of instruction in primary schools in Gambella?
3. What strategies can be employed to improve the use of native languages as mediums of instruction in Gambella's primary education?

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in Gambella Regional State, Ethiopia, focusing on Gambella town and three zones: Godere, Abobo, and Nyenignang. A descriptive survey design with both qualitative and quantitative methods was used to explore the use of native languages as a medium of instruction in public primary schools. The sample included 8 schools (2 from Gambella town, 6 from the zones) and 96 participants: 80 teachers, 8 school principals, and 8 education experts. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed narratively. Data collection was conducted over a week, with instruments pilot-tested and refined. SPSS was used for quantitative analysis, and narrative descriptions were used for qualitative data.

3. Literature Review

The concept of **mother-tongue education** emphasizes the importance of teaching children in their native language, which facilitates smoother language acquisition, better comprehension, and improved cognitive development. Research has shown that children learn best when taught in their mother tongue, particularly during their early years, as it aids in emotional development, cultural identity, and academic success (Abeje, 2010; Fisseha, 1994). UNESCO (1958) highlights mother-tongue instruction not only as an educational principle but as a human right, promoting linguistic diversity and supporting psychological well-being. Studies also indicate that teaching in the first language strengthens a child's cognitive foundation and lays the groundwork for acquiring additional languages and academic skills (Cummins, 1981, 2000).

Mother-tongue instruction offers significant pedagogical, psychological, sociological, and political benefits. Pedagogically, it simplifies classroom communication, making it easier for students to understand and retain concepts (Cummins, 2000). Psychologically, it enhances students' self-esteem, reduces frustration, and eases their transition to formal education (Rubanza, 1999). Culturally, mother-tongue education strengthens children's connection to their heritage and promotes social cohesion (Hurisa, 2010). Politically, it empowers ethnic minorities by recognizing their linguistic rights, fostering inclusivity and national unity (Hobben, 1994). Additionally, the relationship between language and cognition emphasizes that early mastery of the mother tongue is essential for developing academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2000).

However, **implementing mother-tongue education** faces several challenges. Politically, selecting a language for instruction in multilingual countries can lead to conflicts, especially when minority languages are involved. Linguistically, many indigenous languages lack standardized written forms, making their integration into formal education difficult (UNESCO, 1958). Educationally, the absence of suitable teaching materials and trained educators in local languages remains a significant obstacle. Socio-culturally, there is often resistance to mother-tongue education due to the perceived superiority of foreign languages, particularly in regions where global communication is prioritized (UNESCO, 1958). Moreover, economic constraints can hinder the development of resources for mother-tongue education (UNESCO, 1958).

In Ethiopia, the **education language policy** has undergone several phases, reflecting both internal and external influences. Early education focused on European languages, with

Amharic being the primary medium of instruction. However, during the **Italian occupation** (1936-1941), local languages were introduced into the education system. Under **Emperor Haile Selassie** (1941-1974), the education system remained Europeanized, although efforts were made to include indigenous languages in some areas. The **Derg regime** (1974-1991) adopted a socialist policy recognizing ethnic rights, introducing 15 indigenous languages in literacy campaigns, though Amharic remained the primary language of instruction. In 1994, the **Transitional Government of Ethiopia** implemented a more inclusive policy, allowing primary education in over 20 ethnic languages while continuing to use English for secondary and higher education. The Gambella region in Ethiopia, which is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, has benefited from the national language policy. Native languages, including Anywaa, Nuer, and Majang, are now used as mediums of instruction in primary schools. The Anywaa and Nuer languages were introduced in 1996, and Majang was incorporated into the curriculum in 2010. The introduction of mother tongue education in Gambella has been a positive development for the region, providing children with an education in their native languages.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Practice of native languages as a medium of instruction

Table1. Result on practice of native languages as a medium of instruction

No	Statement		Responses				
			Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Teachers are interested and have positive attitude towards using native languages as a medium of instruction.	F	1	6	3	30	40
		%	1.3	7.5	3.8	37.5	50
2	Teachers believe that learners learn better when they are taught using native languages as a medium of instruction.	F	4	5	4	21	46
		%	5	6.3	5	26.3	57.5
3	Teachers deliver lesson in effective and efficient manner for the learners	F	7	12	26	27	8
		%	8.8	15	32.5	33.8	10
4	Teachers apply appropriate teaching methodologies.	F	11	9	25	25	10
		%	13.8	11.3	31.3	31.3	12.5

5	Teachers' Prepare and use locally made teaching aids to supplement their teaching	F	19	26		17	18
		%	23.8	32.3		21.3	22.5
6	The school provide the necessary supervision and give timely feedbacks for the teachers'	F	6	15	8	25	26
		%	7.5	18.8	10	31.3	32.5
7	The school administration work in cooperation with other stakeholders in the region	F	11	22	5	24	18
		%	13.8	27.5	6.3	30	22.5
8	Monitoring and evaluation is made timely by regional, zonal and Woreda education office experts.	F	15	23	17	16	9
		%	18.8	28.8	21.3	20	11.3

The table above about whether teachers are interested and have positive attitude towards using native languages as a medium of instruction shows that the majority of respondents (87.5%) expressed a positive attitude toward using native languages as a medium of instruction. Most teachers agree or strongly agree that they believe in the importance of native languages for better learning outcomes. This reflects a general commitment to using native languages in teaching.

Pertaining to the teachers believe that learners learn better when they are taught using native languages as a medium of instruction, A significant portion (84%) of the participants believe that learners learn better when taught in native languages. This indicates strong support for the effectiveness of using native languages in education. For the next statement, 33.8% of teachers agree that lessons are delivered effectively and efficiently, 32.5% remained neutral, suggesting that some teachers may struggle with lesson delivery. Observations from the study indicate a need for improvement in making lessons more effective.

Concerning item 4, a majority of teachers reported applying appropriate teaching methodologies, but a large portion (42.5%) expressed neutral or dissenting views. This suggests a gap in the use of effective teaching strategies, as observed in classroom settings, indicating a need for further teacher training. Regarding item 5, the majority (56.1%) of teachers reported not using locally made teaching aids. Interviews revealed that while some teachers do prepare such materials, it is not widespread practice.

For the sixth item, over half of the respondents (64.3%) agreed that schools provide adequate supervision and feedback, indicating that schools in the region offer essential support for teachers. This helps in improving teaching practices and ensuring better use of native languages in the classroom. For the next item, the majority of respondents (52.5%) agreed

that school administrations collaborate with regional education stakeholders. As can be seen from table above for the last item, the results showed that most teachers (47.6%) believe that timely monitoring and evaluation are lacking, which could affect the quality of education.

Challenges on the Practices of Native Languages as a Medium of Instruction

Table2. Result on Challenges related to teacher training and professional development

No	Statement	Responses						Mean	Rank
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree			
1	Lack of professional teachers in the schools to teach using native language	F	1	6	3	30	40	4.27	1
		%	1.3	7.5	3.8	37.5	50		
2	Lack of teachers professional development programs	F	4	5	4	21	46	4.25	2
		%	5	6.3	5	26.3	57.5		
3	Lack of training provided to the teachers'	F	8	15	11	27	19	3.42	4
		%	10	18.8	13.8	33.8	23.8		
4	Irrelevance of training and materials given for teachers to local languages	F	8	7	9	26	30	3.78	3
		%	10	8.8	11.3	32.5	37.5		

Table2, above deal with result on challenges related to teacher training and professional development affecting the practice of native languages as a medium of instruction in the study area. For the first item, the majority of respondents (87.5%) agreed that there is a shortage of professional teachers qualified to teach using native languages. The mean score of 4.27 emphasizes this as a primary challenge. Many teachers are not adequately trained to teach in native languages, which significantly impact the quality of instruction. The scarcity of qualified teachers was also confirmed through interviews, where it was noted that most teachers had only certificate-level training, with some lacking formal training in native language instruction altogether.

For the second item, a significant portion (83.8%) of respondents indicated that there is a lack of professional development programs for teachers in the study area. This points to a major gap in ongoing teacher training, which is crucial for enhancing teaching practices and

supporting the use of native languages in the classroom. Regarding this, the result of interview also pointed as they were among the challenges that affect the effective practice of using native language as a medium of instruction in the study area. The participants of the interview replied regarding this challenge as follows:

“Most teachers in the schools are certificate program graduates who completed a one-year training at a teacher training institution (TTI), with a few holding diplomas. Some teachers, although graduates in fields unrelated to the native languages, are teaching due to their fluency in the languages used as the medium of instruction. This issue stems from the lack of higher education institutions in the region and the country.”

According to current directive of MOE first and second cycle primary schools teacher shall have a minimum of first degree in their qualification. However, the teachers in the study area teaching using native language as a medium of instruction do not fulfill the minimum requirement set by the Ethiopian MOE. For the third item, a majority of respondents (57.6%) agreed that there is insufficient training provided to teachers, particularly in the area of using native languages as a medium of instruction. Classroom observations also revealed that teachers faced difficulties in delivering lessons effectively, largely due to the lack of adequate training. This finding aligns with other research, such as Alidou (2003), which highlights the negative impact of insufficient teacher preparation on the quality of education.

For the final item under this section, the majority of participants (70%) reported that the training and materials provided to teachers were irrelevant to the local languages used in instruction. Interviews revealed that the training was conducted in English and did not adequately address the needs of teachers working with native languages. This disconnect between training content and the language of instruction further compounds the challenges teachers face in effectively implementing native language education.

Table3. Result on Challenges related to instructional material

No	Statement	F	Responses						
			Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Rank
1	Lack of text books and teacher	F	2	6	4	27	41	4.23	1

	guides	%	2.5	7.5	5	33.8	51.3		
2	Lack of dictionaries written in native languages	F	5	6	6	40	23	3.87	2
		%	6.3	7.5	7.5	50	28.8		
3	Lack of reference materials in school library written on languages	F	15	5	6	26	28	3.58	3
		%	18.8	6.3	7.5	32.5	35		
4	Lack of online literature and reference materials written in native languages	F	14	7	9	18	32	3.58	3
		%	17.5	8.8	11.3	22.5	40		
5	Poor standardization of instructional materials	F	15	19	13	12	21	3.06	5
		%	18.8	23.8	16.3	15	26.3		

On the above table item 1, teachers were asked whether lack of text books and teacher guides affect the teaching learning in the study area, a significant majority of respondents (85.1%) agreed that the lack of textbooks and teacher guides adversely affects the teaching and learning process in the study area. Classroom observations and interviews further confirmed this challenge, with teachers and students lacking necessary textbooks. This shortage has a direct impact on the quality of education, limiting resources available for effective instruction.

For the second challenge about whether there is lack of dictionaries written in native languages or not, over 78.8% of the participants reported the absence of dictionaries written in native languages, highlighting the difficulty teachers and students face in developing vocabulary skills. This challenge restricts the ability to expand linguistic knowledge, which is essential for both teaching and learning in native languages. Regarding reference materials availability in school library written on languages, a large portion of respondents (67.5%) identified the lack of reference materials in school libraries, particularly those written in native languages, as a significant challenge. This scarcity limits the resources available to support teachers in delivering lessons and for students to deepen their understanding of subjects taught in their native languages.

For the fourth challenge in the table, More than 62.5% of respondents agreed that there is a shortage of online literature and reference materials in native languages, which further hinders access to modern learning resources. The interview responses from school principals

and education experts corroborated this finding, pointing out the significant shortage of instructional materials in schools. For the final about standardization of instructional materials, around 41.3% of the respondents indicated that the instructional materials available were poorly standardized. This lack of standardization affects the consistency and quality of educational content, further complicating the teaching process. This issue was also highlighted in the interviews, where education experts noted the need for improved coordination and consistency in instructional material development.

4.2. Results on possible strategies to overcome the challenges

On the strategies to address the challenges hinder the practice of using native languages as a medium of instruction in the study area, data were gathered mainly from teachers, school principals and education experts through interview. To this regards, the participants suggested several strategies. These include enhancing teacher training by collaborating with local teacher training institutes and offering short-term professional development programs. To overcome the lack of educational resources, schools should promote the use of locally made teaching aids, while education offices at different levels should collaborate with the community to raise funds for instructional materials. Additionally, the revision of the curriculum provides an opportunity to update and create new textbooks in native languages. Participants also recommended learning from regions with better resource availability and seeking support from NGOs to develop necessary instructional materials.

Conclusions

The study revealed that the practice of using native languages as a medium of instruction in Gambella's primary education faces several challenges, including a lack of professional teachers, insufficient teacher training and development programs, limited educational resources such as textbooks, dictionaries, and reference materials, and the lack of standardization in instructional materials. Despite these challenges, a significant number of teachers and education stakeholders expressed a positive attitude toward the use of native languages in teaching and recognized their importance for improving students' learning outcomes.

However, gaps remain in the quality and availability of instructional resources, and teachers often lack the necessary training to effectively deliver lessons in native languages. These issues are compounded by the scarcity of locally developed teaching materials and the absence of degree programs in native languages at regional colleges. Overall, while the

potential for the successful use of native languages in the region's education system is evident, urgent efforts are needed to address the identified challenges.

Recommendations

The findings of this study carry significant pedagogical implications for the use of native languages as a medium of instruction in Gambella regional state. Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are put forward: Teachers are encouraged to maintain and enhance their positive attitude towards using native languages in the classroom while improving their teaching methods through collaboration with peers. Additionally, teachers should focus on utilizing locally made teaching aids, with support from students and the broader school community. School administrations are advised to strengthen supervision and provide timely feedback, working closely with regional education stakeholders to improve teacher professional development.

Furthermore, education offices at the woreda, zonal, and regional levels should collaborate effectively to enhance teacher training programs, which are essential for the successful implementation of the curriculum. Finally, the regional education authorities are urged to work in partnership with both governmental and non-governmental organizations to address the challenges hindering the use of native languages in primary education.

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