

Impacts of Time in Transition to English Medium Instruction on Students' English Language Exam Performance: The Case of Primary School Students in Ethiopia.

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impacts of varying transition timings to English Medium Instruction on students' English language development and exam performance in Ethiopian primary schools. Following the 1994 Education and Training Policy, which promoted mother tongue instruction in primary education, regions adopted different EMI transition points. Thus, the study compares English language exam performance between students transitioning to EMI at different primary education stages in two relatively homogeneous schools from regions with differing EMI transition timings. Totally, 196 students participated in the study. Using a quantitative approach, the study analyzed data from Primary School Leaving Regional English exams and a standardized English proficiency test. Results from independent samples t-tests for both data revealed statistically significant differences, with students making later transition to EMI outperforming those that make earlier transition. This finding supports the hypothesis that extended mother tongue instruction contributes to better second language development and exam performance.

Keywords: *early transition, exam performance, late transition, mother tongue, target language*

1. Introduction

In the academic world, the role of language ability in the medium of instruction is widely recognized as a crucial factor enabling learners to achieve their academic goals (Konget al., 2012; Rahmat et al., 2015). In countries where English is introduced as a medium of instruction (EMI), the transition occurs at different educational levels, ranging from junior secondary to higher education. This disparity in transition timing results in varied durations of mother tongue use, which in turn impacts students' English language development and their performance in English language exams. It is hypothesized that students who are exposed to EMI for a longer period benefit more, as they have greater opportunities to develop their English language skills through varied activities (Ellis, 2005; Lu, 2002; Nunan, 1989). Conversely, longer use of the mother tongue may also provide benefits, as it allows for better development of first language abilities, which can be transferable to second language learning (Cummins, 1999).

Before the introduction of the Education and Training Policy in 1994, Ethiopia, a multilingual and multicultural state, had employed different languages as mediums of instruction. Modern education in Ethiopia was introduced in 1908 with the establishment of Menelik II Primary School, which emphasized on teaching foreign languages including English, French, and Italian (Negash, 2019). During the Italian occupation (1935-41), some ethnic languages were introduced in Ethiopian schools as mediums of instruction (Young, 1997, as cited in Heugh et al., 2007). Post-occupation, English became the medium of instruction, with Amharic (a language spoken widely) declared the medium at the primary level (grades 1-6) in 1958/59, and English retained for junior, secondary, and tertiary levels (McNab, 1988; Tsehay, 1997, as cited in Heugh et al., 2007).

The 1994 Education and Training Policy marked a significant shift by promoting mother tongue instruction in primary education (grades 1-8). This policy granted regional states the autonomy to determine the extent of mother tongue use, leading to variations in the transition to EMI practice. Some regions adopted local languages up to grades four or six, while others extended this to grade eight. Despite the policy guidelines, in some regions transitions were made to EMI at earlier grade levels without justifiable reasons (Getachew & Derib, 2006).

This uneven implementation of medium of instruction policies across Ethiopia has created diverse educational experiences. Students who make transition later to EMI benefit from extended mother tongue instruction by enhancing cognitive and language skills transferable to English. In contrast, those who make transition earlier may struggle with insufficient proficiency in both their first and second languages (Heugh et al., 2007). This study investigates the impact of the timing of EMI exposure on students' English language development and exam performance, focusing on two relatively homogeneous primary schools in two regions in Ethiopia that experience different timing in transition (Oromiya, and Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Region (SNNP)).

By examining students from these two schools in the regions with differing EMI transition timing, this research aims to provide insights into the optimal strategies for implementing EMI in primary education. The findings will offer practical recommendations for policymakers, contributing to the broader discourse on languages of instruction.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Mother Tongue Medium Effects

To be successful in their studies, students need to have adequate language abilities in the language of instruction. Language skills are needed so that learners can effectively perform in their learning (Kong et al., 2012; Rahmat et al., 2015). When students are exposed to mother tongue education, the environment will support them so that they could develop their language skills. Educating children in their mother tongue enables children to obtain parental support in their studies as parents get the opportunity to discuss on issues pertaining to their children's learning. This allows children to go to school well prepared and ready to succeed in their studies (Stoop, 2017).

In addition to the points stated above, mother tongue medium education has many benefits. Among others, it contributes in the development of learners cognitive skills. Khan (2016) states that using the first language as a medium of instruction is the best way for children to develop their cognitive abilities. Developing learners' cognitive skills involves complex processes and are manifested by an acquired language. When children acquire a language, they will have well developed language skills that enhance better cognitive functioning. A study by UNESCO (2008) supports the idea that well developed first language skills contribute in the development of students' cognitive ability facilitating better comprehension and learning outcomes. If the

language children use as a medium of instruction is not sufficiently developed, it will less likely contribute for the development of their cognitive abilities (Taylor, 2005).

Mother tongue medium education also enables children to develop their linguistic and communication abilities as they confidently take part in classroom discussions, thereby developing their communication abilities. The input learners are exposed to learning in the mother tongue is comprehensible and will enable them to develop their linguistic as well as communication abilities (Khan, 2016; Murphy, 2014; UNESCO, 2008).

When first language skills are developed well, learning other languages will be facilitated as concepts and literacy skills in the first language can be transferred to the second language. If the skills are not sufficiently developed in the first language, learning the second language becomes difficult (Cummins, 2000). In this regard, a study by Koda (2005) revealed that learning to read in the mother tongue and successive achievement in reading in the second language showed high correlation.

Language skills adequately developed in the mother tongue offer numerous benefits for children (Tongue, 2014). However, in the context of this study, students in some regions are forced to make transition to English medium instruction before they sufficiently develop their first language skills. It is presumed that this will negatively affect the students' English language development and performance in English exams.

2.2 Transferability of Language Skills

The concept of transferability of language skills is crucial when considering the transition from mother tongue instruction to EMI, particularly in the Ethiopian context. Cummins' (1978, 2000) developmental interdependence hypothesis posits that language competence achieved in the first language significantly determines learners' competence in a second language. This theory suggests that when learners' first language is well-developed, it facilitates easier development of their second language.

Verhoeven (1991) as cited in Cummins (2000), found that literacy skills well-developed in one language strongly predict equivalent skills in a subsequently learned language. This aligns with Elizabeth Thompson's (1998) observation, quoted by Cummins (2000:182): "Academic language proficiency transfers across languages such that students who have developed literacy in their L1 will tend to make stronger progress in acquiring literacy in L2."

Several scholars (Benson, 2008; Clegg, 2005; Erling et al., 2016 as cited in Boateng, 2019; Ssentanda, 2014) strongly criticize early exit models from mother tongue instruction. They argue that such models impede learners' cognitive, academic, and linguistic skills development: skills that would otherwise be transferrable to second language learning if well developed. Furthermore, Cummins (2000) and Boateng (2009) assert that better second/foreign language ability built on well-developed first language skills, leads to improved performance in target language exams. Dearden's (2014) emphasis on gradual transition to EMI aligns with the transferability concept, suggesting that students need time to develop sufficient first language skills before transitioning. However, in the context of this study, students from early transition model do so without enough time to study in their first language and make transition to EMI with no well developed first language skills that could be transferred to second language abilities.

2.3 Effects of English Language Proficiency on Students' Performance

The importance of language proficiency in the medium of instruction, particularly English in EMI contexts, is crucial for students' academic success. This is especially relevant when considering the timing of transition to EMI in Ethiopian primary schools.

Several studies across different contexts have demonstrated a strong link between English language proficiency and academic performance. Rahmat et al. (2015), for instance in his study of international students in Malaysia, found a correlation between students' English language proficiency and their performance in engineering studies.

A study by Johnson (1988) on medical students from non-English speaking countries at the preparatory level in Wisconsin, USA, concluded that English language proficiency is a significant factor contributing to better academic performance in college studies. Another study by Kong et al. (2012) also confirmed that students' academic performance is dependent on their English language proficiency level.

These findings underscore the critical role of adequate proficiency in the language of instruction for academic success. In the context of EMI, students with better English language skills are better equipped to perform well across various subjects using English as a tool.

The relationship between English proficiency and academic performance has significant implications for the timing of transitioning to EMI. Studies suggest that students need to achieve a certain level of English proficiency before transitioning to EMI to ensure academic success. This aligns with Dearden's (2014) emphasis on gradual transition to EMI. Students with

inadequate English skills may struggle to meet their academic needs in an EMI setting. This highlights the importance of appropriate timing in the transition to EMI, as discussed by Heugh et al. (2007) in the Ethiopian context.

The correlation between language proficiency and academic performance suggests that the timing of EMI transition may have differential effects on students based on their English language skills. This relates to the findings of Heugh et al.(2007) on regional variations in Ethiopia. The impact of English proficiency on academic performance underscores the potential long-term effects of EMI transition timing, as suggested by Thomas and Collier (2002).

2.3 Research Objective

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the impacts of difference in time in transition to EMI on students' English language exam performance in Ethiopian primary schools. More specifically, it tried to compare the English language exam performance of students who make transition to EMI at different stages of primary education. Based on this, the study tested the following research hypothesis:

H1: Students who make transition to EMI at a later stage in primary education will show significantly better performance in English language exams compared to students who make earlier transition to EMI.

Ho: Students who make transition to EMI at a later stage in primary education will not show significantly better performance in English language exams compared to students who make earlier transition to EMI.

3. Methods

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the impacts of time in transition to EMI on students' English language exam performance. The research aimed to empirically examine the relationship between the timing of EMI transition and students' performance in English language exams.

3.1 Participants

The study focused on data obtained from students who experienced either early or late transition to EMI in Ethiopian primary schools. To ensure a comparative analysis, participants were selected from two distinct regions of Ethiopia that implement different EMI transition modalities. Students from a primary school (Karat Primary School) in a region that implements early transition (SNNP) and students from another primary school (Yabaaloo Primary School)

from a region that implements late transition (Oromiya) were used. Selection of the schools followed purposive sampling procedure in terms of socio-economic factors, school resources, and teaching quality, as determined by the researchers' preliminary observations to have relatively homogenous groups.

3.2 Materials

This study used two primary sources of data to investigate the impacts of time in transition to EMI on students' English language exam performance. Primary School Leaving Regional English Language exam records from two schools in two different regions in Ethiopia (Karat Primary School in SNNP and Yabaaloo Primary School in Oromiya Regions) and English Language Proficiency test those same students in the schools had sat for.

Primary School Leaving Regional English exam results of the year 2022 were used. The exams consisted of several components: reading comprehension, language usage, grammar, vocabulary, writing, and spelling. These components provided a comprehensive assessment of students' English language skills within the context of the Ethiopian curriculum. To supplement the regional exam data and provide a standardized measure of English proficiency, we utilized the Cambridge English Proficiency 1 (Updated Exam 2018) test. This standardized test was accessed online and administered to students from both schools. The researchers determined the choice and number of test items. The test focused on three key areas: reading comprehension, language usage and grammar. In total, the test comprised 25 questions.

It is important to note a potential limitation in our study: Since each region in Ethiopia administers its own exams based on a centrally produced blueprint, there may be variations in difficulty levels across regional exams. To mitigate this limitation and ensure comparability, we employed the standardized Cambridge proficiency test across all participants. This approach allowed us to balance potential regional disparities and provide a consistent measure of English language proficiency across the study sample. By using data from both the regional exams and the standardized proficiency test, we aimed to create a more robust and comprehensive assessment of students' English language skills in relation to their EMI transition timing.

3.3 Procedure

Primary School Leaving English Language official exam results of the study sites were obtained from the administrative records of the two participating schools. Results of 79 students from Yabaaloo (that make late transition) and 117 students in Karat Primary School (that make

early transition) were obtained. The proficiency test was administered a week prior to the primary school leaving regional exam to students in both study sites for students would be dispersed after taking the regional exam. The proficiency test was administered simultaneously in three classrooms at Yabaaloo and five at Karat Primary school, with one teacher supervising each classroom to ensure test integrity.

A total of three and five teachers per school were involved respectively in administering the test, ensuring consistent testing conditions across all participants. School administration and teachers provided close support and supervision throughout the testing process. Students were informed that participation was voluntary. All students who were eligible to take the regional exam in both schools volunteered to participate in the proficiency test, providing informed consent. After the participants had done the proficiency test, the researchers personally scored all answer sheets using the official answer key provided by the test-setting institute, ensuring consistency in marking. Raw test scores were converted to percentages to facilitate analysis and comparison with the regional exam results.

4.Results

To arrive at provisional findings, and accept or reject the hypothesis: “Students who make transition to EMI at a later stage in primary education will show significantly better performance in English language exams compared to students who make earlier transition to EMI”, this study relied on two data sets: Primary School Leaving Regional English Language exam results and proficiency test results students from the two study sites sat for. Data obtained from both sources were entered into SPSS version 22 for analysis. Following this, independent samples t-test was run to test the hypothesis made above and give answers to the research question posed. Independent samples t-test was used for the data obtained were from different assessment tools used to measure different aspects of the same construct (language proficiency and summative language test). It is also suitable for comparing mean scores on continuous variables (regional exam and proficiency test results). Furthermore, it allows comparison between two independent groups (early vs. late EMI transition). Data from the two sources were analyzed separately and are presented as follows.

4.1 Analysis of Primary School Leaving Regional English Language Exam Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare Primary School Leaving English Exam results for students that make late transition and early transition to EMI. Based on results of the test, there were significant differences ($t(194)=29.86$, $p=.000$) in the scores with mean score for students that make late transition to EMI ($M=74.45$, $SD=7.22$) being higher than students that make early transition to EMI ($M=33.33$, $SD=10.69$). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference=41.12, 95% CI=38.4 to 43.83) was significant. Hence,

H1 was supported.

Table 1

Independent sample test for primary school leaving regional English exams

Group Statistics						Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								Sig. (2- taile d)		Mean Differe nce		Std. Error Diffe rence		95% Confidence Interval
Lower	Upper													
Students that make late and early transition to EMI	N	Me an	Std. Deviati on	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.	t	df						
Primary School Leaving Regional English exam result	Late transiti on to EMI	79	74.45	7.23	0.81	3.7	0.05	29.86	194	0	41.12	1.38	38.4	43.83
	Early transiti on to EMI	11	33.33	10.7	0.99			32.11	19	0	41.12	1.28	38.59	43.64

Table 1 presents the independent samples t-test result of Primary School Leaving English Exam results between students that make late and early transition to EMI. According to the results, the mean scores were 74.45 for students that make late transition and 33.33 for students that make early transition with standard deviation of 7.23 and 10.7, respectively. Analysis of the independent samples t-test indicated that students that make late transition performed better than students that make early transition to EMI in Primary School Leaving Regional English exams as

the means of both groups indicate. Furthermore, the p-value .000 is less than .05, alpha. This makes the alternate hypothesis temporarily accepted. In addition, 95 % of the confidence interval

lies between 38.4 at the lower limit and 43.83 at the upper limit. This means 95% of the true mean value lies between 38.4 and 43.83. The range in which the true mean value is likely to be found with a certain probability (95% in our case) is the confidence interval.

4.2 Analysis of Proficiency Test Results

To further strengthen results of the study, analysis was made on participants' proficiency test results. Based on this, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the Proficiency test performance between students that make late and early transition to EMI. Based on results, there were significant differences ($t(194)=16.3$, $p=.000$) in the scores, with mean score for students that make late transition to EMI ($M=57.57$, $SD=4.72$) being higher than students that make early transition to EMI ($M=37.09$, $SD=10.46$). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference=20.48, 95% CI=18 to 22.95) was significant. Hence, H1 was supported too as in the analysis of Primary School Leaving Regional English Language Exam results.

Table 2

Independent sample test for proficiency test

Group Statistics						Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								Sig.		Std.	95% Confidence			
Students that make late and early transition to EMI								(2- taile d)	Mean Differe nce	Error Differe nce	Interval			
	N	Me an	Std. Deviasi on	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.	t	df				Lower	Upper	
Proficienc y test result	Late transiti on to EMI	79	57.5 7	4.72	0.53	39. 21	0.00	16. 30	19 4. 00	0.00	20.48	1.26	18.00	22.95
	Early transiti on to EMI	11 7	37.0 9	10.46	0.97			18. 55	17 3. 18	0.00	20.48	1.10	18.30	22.65

standard deviation of 4.72 and 10.46, respectively. Analysis of the independent samples t-test indicated that students that make late transition performed better than students that make early transition to EMI as the mean scores of both groups indicated. Furthermore, the p-value .000 is less than .05, alpha. This makes the alternate hypothesis temporarily accepted as in the analysis of Primary School Leaving Regional English Exam results. Furthermore, given 95 % confidence interval, the lower limit is 18 and 22.95 is the upper limit, which means 95% of the true mean value lies between 18 and 22.95.

5. Discussion

This study was intended to investigate if late transition to EMI contributes to students' better performance in English language exams. To this end, an independent samples t-test was run on the students' Primary School Leaving Regional English Exam results and a proficiency test separately. Results of the study from both sources of data showed that there is statistically significant difference in the students' English exam performance in favor of late transition between students who make late transition to EMI and those that make early transition. It was also learned that longer mother tongue use as a medium of instruction contributes to students' second/foreign language development as students that used mother tongue for longer performed better in English language exams. This shows the transfer of well developed first language skills to second/foreign language development as students that make late transition out performed in both data sets. Furthermore, it can be inferred from the results that longer English medium use does not guarantee improved English language ability that could have resulted in better performance in English exams.

The results of this study go in line with the hypothesis that students that make transition to EMI at later stages of their primary education reveal better performance in English language exams compared to students that make early transition to EMI. The findings were consistent across both instruments used in the study (Primary School Leaving Regional English exam and proficiency test). This maintains the consistency of the conclusions.

The findings underscore the positive impact of a delayed transition to English Medium Instruction (EMI) on students' development of second/foreign language skills. Building upon a strong foundation of well-developed first language abilities, students are better equipped to effectively communicate, write, and comprehend academic materials as they progress to higher levels of their studies. Moreover, proficiency in English acquired due to language ability

transferred from strong first language abilities can enhance their prospects for securing employment in industries that prioritize English language skills.

5.1 Late Transition and Improved English exam performance

Extended use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction has resulted in statistically significant difference in performance in English exams of students. This shows the benefits of longer mother tongue use in the development of language skills in the first language that are transferable to second/foreign language learning, given the relative homogeneity of the study sites. This is a finding that aligns with Cummins' (1979) Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis, which is supported by Sharon et al. (2021). It states that strong first language foundation contributes to better second language learning. The finding further supports Linguistic Interdependence Principle (Cummins 1981), which suggests cognitive and literacy skills well developed in the first language are transferable to second language skills. Better performance of students that make late transition in the exams may be attributed to transfer of well developed cognitive and literacy skills to second language learning. Furthermore, arguments made by scholars such as Benson (2004) and Heugh (2011) on the benefits of extended mother tongue use as medium are also supported by these findings.

5.2 Duration of EMI exposure

Findings of this study reveal that longer exposure to EMI does not guarantee improved English language ability or better performance in English exams. This challenges the axiom, "more English is better" mainly when children are not ready to use the target language as a medium of instruction and teachers' proficiency is not reliable as Bishaw and Melesse (2017); Teferra and Altbach (2018); and Woldeyes (2022) state with regard to Ethiopian teachers' English language proficiency. It also aligns with the studies by Heugh et al. (2007) and Rollnick (2000), which state that early transition to EMI can be unfavorable to content and language learning when teachers are not well trained and do not possess the proficiency level expected as well as when the environment does not support use of a foreign language as a medium as in the Ethiopian situation.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study have important implications for language of instruction policy. The implications drawn from the study show the critical role of the timing of transition to EMI in primary education settings. The findings suggest that a delayed transition to EMI can positively

impact students' English language exam performance, emphasizing the importance of a strong foundation in the first language for enhanced second/foreign language development. It can be understood that regions in Ethiopia follow different modalities of language of instruction use. This benefits some and negatively affects others. Hence, policy makers should consider employing extended mother tongue use across the regions to promote stronger mother tongue skills and effective second/foreign language learning. This approach can facilitate the transfer of well-developed first language skills to second/foreign language learning, leading to improved academic performance in English language exams. Longer mother tongue use should be promoted as it contributes in the development of cognitive and literacy ability that could potentially lead to improved English language performance and academic outcomes across other subjects. Further research is also needed to explore the long-term effects of EMI transition timing on students' academic performance and language proficiency as well as determine the optimal timing for transition. In conclusion, the findings of this study support a strong mother tongue foundation that can be achieved by delayed transition to EMI as it provides evidence based insights for policy makers.

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Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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