

# Policy and Practice on Language of Instruction in Ethiopian Schools

Findings from the Young Lives School Survey

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# Summary

Education policies regarding language of instruction are hotly debated in countries where the population speaks multiple languages, including English. On the one hand, there is research to suggest that educating students in their mother tongue results in improved educational outcomes because it facilitates understanding of new concepts and strengthens affective measures such as self-esteem, identity, motivation and creativity. On the other hand, some argue that mother tongue education disadvantages students in some contexts, particularly where languages are not sufficiently developed to express modern concepts in fields such as mathematics and science. It is therefore important to investigate the benefits and challenges of language of instruction policies on a case-by-case basis since education is never conducted in a vacuum; rather, the effects of educational policies are necessarily influenced by broader structural forces and individuals' lived experiences. This paper uses qualitative and quantitative data from the 2010 Young Lives school survey to examine the arguments around language of instruction in the Ethiopian context.

# The Author

**Daniel Vujcich** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford and worked as a research assistant for Young Lives. He holds an MPhil in Development Studies from the University of Oxford.

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## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

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# 1. Introduction

Medium-of-instruction (Moi) educational policies are hotly debated in countries where the population speaks multiple languages either as a consequence of historical factors (i.e. colonisation, war, multi-ethnic nation-building), or more recent globalising forces, such as immigration and the spread of Anglo-American cultural influences.

There is research to suggest that educating students in their first language (also known as mother tongue education, MTE) results in improved educational outcomes on the basis that it supports sound-meaning or meaning-symbol correspondence, facilitates understanding of new concepts and strengthens affective measures such as self-esteem, identity, motivation and creativity (Benson 2004). The push for MTE is also associated with a desire to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity and protect human rights. MTE-based bilingual or multilingual education is promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2003), and Article 4(3) of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 47/135 requires states to 'take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn in their mother tongue'.

However, arguments against MTE include the contention that some traditional languages are not sufficiently developed to express modern concepts in fields such as mathematics and science; the perception that MTE undermines students' capacities to compete in global ideas and labour markets; and the concern that while MTE may, in theory, be preferable, resource constraints and teacher or parent opposition stand as significant obstacles to effective implementation (Benson 2004). Benson (2004) notes that '[s]imply changing the language of instruction without resolving other pressing social and political issues is not likely to result in significant improvements in educational services.'

It is therefore important to investigate the benefits and challenges of Moi policies on a case-by-case basis since education is never conducted in a vacuum; rather, the effects of educational policies are necessarily influenced by broader structural forces and individuals' lived experiences.

In Ethiopia, the 1994 Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (EETP) marked a watershed in the way languages were used for teaching and learning in Ethiopian schools. Ethiopia comprises a number of ethnically based national groups. The EETP made primary education in 'nationality languages' compulsory, and mandated the transition to English as a medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. While mother-tongue-based education at the primary level is consistent with the recommendations of pedagogical theorists, Ethiopia possesses a number of potential barriers to successful implementation. These include budgetary constraints on educational resources; the presence of different languages of varying levels of difficulty; the fact that language is often politically contentious owing to the history of regional/ethnic competition; and the fact that Amharic tends to dominate in urban areas and in government services.

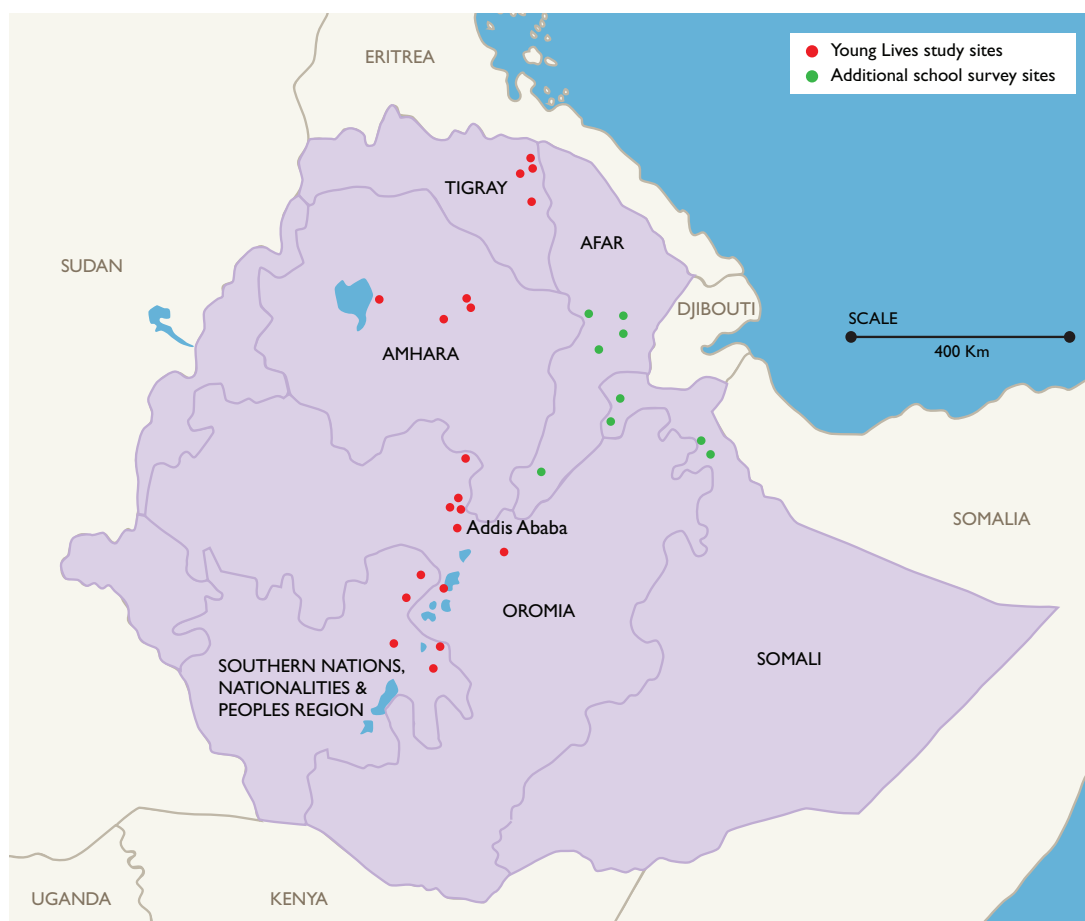
This Working Paper uses qualitative and quantitative data from the 2010 Young Lives school component study to answer the following research questions:

1. What level of support is there for the EETP language model?
2. What are considered to be the positive aspects of MTE at the primary school level?
3. What are considered to be the negative aspects of MTE at the primary school level?
4. How closely is the EETP language model being adhered to in practice?

## 1.1 Background

Ethiopia is a multilingual federation comprising over 80 languages broadly divided into four linguistic groups, namely, Semitic (e.g. Amharic, Tigrigna, Guragiegna), Cushitic (e.g. Afar, Hadiyya, Oromiffa, Sidama, Somali), Omotic (e.g. Wolaytta, Gamo) and Nilo-Saharan (e.g. Berta, Nuer) (Central Statistical Agency and ORC Macro 2006; Seidel and Moritz 2009). The major mother tongues of each of the regions in which Young Lives study sites are located (Figure 1) are summarised in Table 1, based on figures from the 2007 Census.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1.** *Map of administrative regions of Ethiopia in which Young Lives study sites are located*



<sup>1</sup> According to Ethiopia's Central Statistical Agency (2007), the 'mother tongue' of respondents was identified by asking the question 'What is [NAME'S] mother tongue?' Mother tongue 'is the language used by the respondent for communication with his/her family members or guardians during his/her childhood'.

**Table 1.** *Most common mother tongues by Ethiopian administrative area, 2007 (%)*

Region / city	Major mother tongues spoken
Addis Ababa	Amharic (71.0), Oromiffa (10.7), Guragiegna (8.4)
Amhara	Amharic (93)
Oromia	Oromiffa (87.0), Amharic (9.1)
SNNP	Sidama (19.6), Wolaytta (10.5), Hadiyya (8.0), Guragiegna (7.1), Gamo (6.9)
Somali	Somali (96.8)
Tigray	Tigrigna (95.2)

Source: Central Statistical Agency, Ethiopia (2007)

It is clear from the table that some administrative areas are more linguistically homogenous than others; for instance, 95.2 per cent of those living in the Tigray region identified Tigrigna as their mother tongue, whereas five major mother tongues were identified in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNP). The SNNP region contains such a high degree of linguistic diversity (23 languages with over 50,000 speakers) that Amharic was chosen as the official language for largely practical reasons (Smith 2008). In addition, Table 1 demonstrates that a significant minority of people in Oromia identify Amharic as their mother tongue.

The first official Ethiopian educational language policy emerged in 1944 in the form of a directive that Amharic was to be the general language of instruction (Getachew and Derib 2006). In 1955, Amharic was made the official language in Ethiopia's revised constitution, thus extending its use beyond the education sector to the political, legal and administrative spheres (Getachew and Derib 2006). While Amharic had been used as the official language of Ethiopia since the nineteenth century, it was not until Emperor Haile Selassie's regime that there was a concerted push for standardisation of the language and rigorous implementation of the policy (Smith 2008). This shift towards an Amharic-speaking state has been widely interpreted as an attempt on the part of Emperor Haile Selassie to bolster his nation-building project and consolidate his own power (Smith 2008; Getachew and Derib 2006).

While use of Ethiopian languages other than Amharic was discouraged, Haile Selassie's regime did promote the use of English as a Mol in upper-primary and secondary schools and teacher training institutions (Heugh et al. 2007). Historians attribute the decision to the Emperor's gratitude to Britain for its role in helping to expel Italian forces during the Second World War; to the fact that curricula and teaching materials were largely imported from Britain; and to the familiarity of foreign teachers with the language (Heugh et al. 2007; Kitila 2012).

The socialist-inspired revolution of 1974 resulted in a formal reversal of Selassie's homogenising policies, such that each ethnically-based national group was given 'the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, *use its own language* and elect its own leaders and administrators' (Ethiopian Government Programme quoted in Getachew and Derib 2006: 47; emphasis added). In practice, however, Amharic remained the language of instruction in primary schools, principally because teachers most often spoke Amharic and were not trained in the use of local mother tongues (Getachew and Derib 2006).

By the mid-1980s, concerns began to emerge about the potential negative consequences of the widespread use of Amharic in primary schools. Table 2, produced by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education in 1987, suggests that the use of Amharic was hindering the performance of science students with non-Amharic mother tongues, although clearly other differences between pupils in the two language groups may also explain the gap.

**Table 2.** *The impact of the use of Amharic as Mol on science achievement scores, by students' mother tongue (Amharic vs. non-Amharic)*

Grade	Mean achievement score		Difference
	Amharic mother tongue students	Non-Amharic mother tongue students	
1	79.23	69.13	10.10
2	77.51	67.69	9.82

Source: Ethiopian Ministry of Education, cited in Heugh et al. (2007).

At around the same time, questions were also being raised about students' English proficiency. Through field surveys it was observed that:

[s]tudents do not possess sufficient English even to understand what they hear from their teachers and read in their books ... as a result of the inability of students to function through English, the quality of teaching and learning in schools has been very adversely affected. (John Stoddart, quoted in Heugh et al. 2007: 53)

As a result, an argument emerged that "later English means better English" .... [and] "later English means better science, mathematics, geography, etc." (Stoddart, quoted in Heugh et al. 2007: 54).

After the fall of the socialist regime, a new Education and Training Policy was announced in 1994. Clause 3.5 set out the new approach to language in education:

3.5.1 Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages.

...

3.5.3 The language of teacher training for kindergarten and primary education will be the nationality language used in the area.

3.5.4 Amharic shall be taught as a language of countrywide communication.

3.5.5 English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education.

...

3.5.7 English will be taught as a subject starting from grade one.

(Government of Ethiopia 1994)

The way the policy has been implemented in the various administrative areas is summarised in Table 3. It shows that the requirement that primary education be given in nationality languages is adhered to along a spectrum. English is introduced from Grade 5 in Gambella and SNNP region; Grade 7 in Addis Ababa, Benshangul Gumuz and Dire Dawa for all or most content subjects; and Grade 7 in Harari, Somali and some parts of Amhara for science and maths. By contrast, the official policies in Tigray and Oromia strictly follow the EETP.

**Table 3.** *Languages of instruction used in primary schooling and primary teacher training, by administrative area*

Admin. area	Grades 1–4	Grades 5–6	Grades 7–8	Teacher training (Grades 1–4)	Teacher training (Grades 5–8)
Addis Ababa	Amharic		English (all subjects)	English	English
Afar	Amharic Afar (ABE) <sup>a</sup>	Amharic	English (all subjects)		
Amhara	Amharic Awingi Hammittena  Oromiffa (in certain parts of Amhara)		Amharic, Awingi or Hammittena for all subjects except science and maths, which are in English  Oromiffa (all subjects)	Amharic, Awingi (planned)	English
Benshangul Gumuz	Amharic		English (all subjects)	Amharic	English
Dire Dawa	Amharic Oromiffa Somali		English (all subjects except civics)	Amharic	English
Gambella	Nuer Anguak Meshenger	English	English (all subjects)	Nuer Anguak Meshenger	English
Harari	Harari Oromiffa Amharic		Harari, Oromiffa or Amharic for all subjects except science and maths, which are in English	Harari Oromiffa Amharic	English
Oromia	Oromiffa Amharic		Oromiffa or Amharic for all subjects	Oromiffa Amharic	Oromiffa Amharic
SNNP	Amharic, Dawro, Gamo, Gedeo, Gofa, Hadiyya, Kembata, Kafinono, Kontigna, Korete, Sidama, Silti, Wolatya	English	English (all subjects)	Amharic, Dawro, Gamo, Gedeo, Gofa, Hadiyya, Kembata, Kafinono, Kontigna, Korete, Sidama, Silti, Wolatya	English
Somali	Somali  Amharic		Somali (all subjects)  Amharic for all subjects except science and maths, which are in English	Somali Amharic	English
Tigray	Tigringna		Tigringna (all subjects)	Tigrigna	English

<sup>a</sup> alternative basic education

Source: Adapted from Heugh et al. (2007: Table 5.1)

There are differences between the administrative areas in relation to the facilitating factors and barriers to MTE. For instance, while many different languages are spoken in Addis Ababa, the decision to use Amharic as Mol is facilitated by the fact that the language is ‘the working language of the city’s administration’ and the language in which all media are

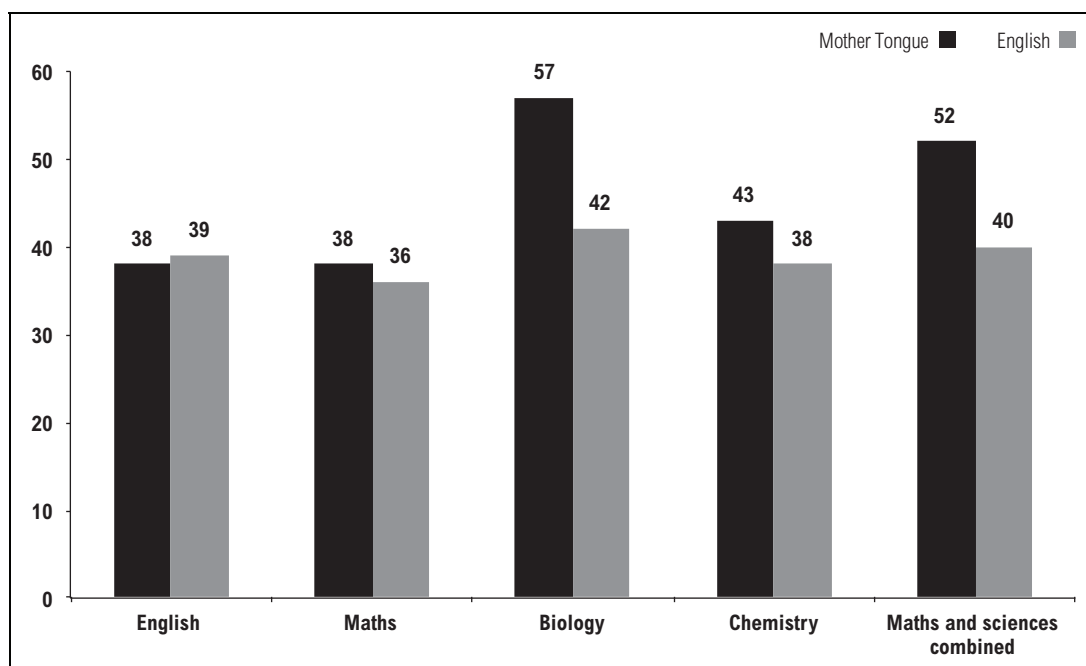
broadcast; however, the fact that Addis Ababa is also the seat of the Oromia Regional State means that there has been pressure for Oromiffa education also (Getachew and Derib 2006). The role of Amharic as the official secular language of Ethiopia and its popular use in the media and other fora has meant that the MTE policy has been relatively 'straightforward' in Amhara, though other languages have been used as Mol in some parts of the region (Getachew and Derib 2006: 52). Similarly in Oromia, the use of Oromiffa in administration, justice, the media and tertiary education has meant that the region has been relatively well placed to implement MTE; the rise of Oromiffa literacy and popular use was closely connected with the growth of Oromia nationalism in the 1970s (Getachew and Derib 2006; Bulcha 1997). By contrast, the fact that '[m]ore than 70% of the languages in Ethiopia are spoken in the [SNNPR]' has put the region at a relative disadvantage with regard to MTE 'mainly due to the small numbers of speakers for the majority of the languages' (Getachew and Derib 2006: 54, 56). For instance, the cost of printing MTE textbooks in the SNNP region has been high because economies of scale are not possible (Getachew and Derib 2006). The attempt to remedy such problems through the creation of a hybrid language ('Wogagoda') from Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro was ultimately unpopular and unsuccessful (Getachew and Derib 2006).

## 1.2 Existing literature

There is a dearth of studies that seek to investigate empirically the impact of the implementation and non-implementation of EETP on Ethiopia's education system, largely because data suited to such analysis are not usually available in the Ethiopian context. Ramachandran (2012) used Ethiopian data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) to examine how the introduction of MTE affected mean years of primary schooling, by comparing data for cohorts of children in Amhara, Dire Dawa, Harari and Oromia who (a) had an Oromiffa language background and therefore gained access to MTE education after 1994, and (b) had an Amharic language background and were unaffected by the policy, since Amharic had historically been the language of instruction. Comparisons were made for those aged 2–7 in 1994 (and who were thus subject to the new policy at the primary school level) and those aged 13–20 in 1994. The study found that MTE was associated with a 0.75–1.0 year increase in the number of years spent in primary schooling by students with an Oromiffa language background, and that the increase was attributable to lower drop-out and higher completion rates, with confounding explanations controlled for.

Heugh et al. (2007) also studied Mol in Ethiopian primary schools, including its impact on achievement in the 2000 and 2004 Grade 8 National Assessments. Figure 2 shows that in the year 2000, students who were taught in English as opposed to mother tongues (Amharic, Tigringna and Omoriffa) achieved lower mean achievement scores in Grade 8 mathematics, biology and chemistry.

**Figure 2.** Mean Grade 8 achievement scores (%) for five subjects, by Mol (English vs. mother tongue), 2000



Source: Adapted from Heugh et al. (2007: Figure 5.2.6)

The data are consistent with findings from the 2004 Grade 8 National Assessments, as shown in Table 4. The table shows that the mean scores of Grade 8 students from MTE primary schools are generally higher across all subjects (except English) than those of students attending primary schools where English is the Mol. However, it is not possible to discount the transition effect (the notion that performance may temporarily decrease as students adjust to the new medium); in Harari, Addis Ababa, Benshangul Gamuz, Dire Dawa and Afar the official policy is for English to be introduced as Mol in the year preceding the examinations.

**Table 4.** Mean Grade 8 achievement scores (%) for five subjects, by medium of instruction, 2004

Mol	English	Maths	Biology	Chemistry	Physics
Oromiffa	39.06 (15.58)	44.40 (16.54)	49.08 (11.68)	42.98 (14.94)	39.48 (12.57)
Amharic	39.07 (13.70)	41.30 (14.30)	48.33 (10.50)	44.59 (15.12)	41.79 (10.98)
Tigrigna	41.61 (15.19)	42.84 (16.83)	48.43 (11.85)	43.59 (14.88)	39.33 (12.06)
Somali	42.40 (14.52)	42.63 (14.52)	36.26 (98.23)	37.55 (11.72)	34.53 (10.14)
English	39.43 (16.14)	35.93 (12.47)	35.93 (12.47)	37.28 (17.70)	31.53 (11.09)

Note: Figures in parentheses are standard deviations.  
Source: Adapted from Heugh et al. (2007: Table 5.2.4)

Analyses conducted by the National Organisation for Examinations (2004) seem consistent with other findings on the link between Mol and academic performance. A measure of the statistical dependence between language and Grade 8 composite scores in the Second National Learning Assessments revealed that English Mol was negatively correlated with student achievement (Spearman coefficient  $-0.248$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (National Organisation for

Examinations, 2004: Table 120). Moreover, the results of a multiple regression analysis of possible factors influencing Grade 8 composite scores in Second National Learning Assessments (Table 5) showed that language of instruction explained 37.3 per cent of the variation in student achievement (although possible confounders include a variety of cultural and geographical factors). In addition, a language variable ('Alignment of language between home and school') in Block 4 was positively correlated with composite scores (standard coefficient 0.307,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 5.** *School-level multiple regression results on the Grade 8 Second National Learning Assessments composite score*

Predictor models	Variables included	R	R-sq	F	d.f.
Block 1: School structure and curriculum materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Budget supplemented by selling hay and vegetables</li> <li>School's different materials</li> <li>Location of the school</li> <li>Time it takes to reach the <i>woreda</i> office from the school</li> <li>School conditions factor 3</li> </ul>	0.453	0.205	8.32***	5,161
Block 2: Teacher variables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher qualifications</li> <li>Total teacher experience</li> <li>Distance from school for teacher</li> <li>Periods taught per week</li> <li>Teacher trained on new teaching techniques</li> <li>Teacher's perception of student learning attitudes</li> </ul>	0.570	0.328	16.37***	6,204
Block 3: School management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effect of director's social obligations on job</li> <li>Director calls teachers' meetings</li> <li>Total number of funding sources</li> </ul>	0.366	0.111	5.73***	3,111
Block 4: Student home background and behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alignment of language between home and school</li> <li>Reading non-textbook materials</li> <li>Student's sense of ownership of school property</li> <li>Distance to home</li> <li>Average interest in subjects</li> </ul>	0.404	0.386	22.42***	6,198
Block 5: Instruction/Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Director's perception of all teachers' instructional quality</li> <li>Sum of student understanding of subjects</li> <li>Amount of help at home</li> <li>Percentage of curriculum taught so far</li> </ul>	0.368	0.136	7.30***	4,186
Block 6: Language of instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is language of instruction English or a local language?</li> </ul>	0.611	0.373	125.51***	1,211

Source: Adapted from National Organisation for Examinations (2004: Table 121)

As has been alluded to above, the Grade 8 National Assessments data do not settle the debate about the effect of Mol on academic performance. For instance, on the one hand it could be argued that Grade 8 students under an English Mol system are doing poorly because learning new concepts in a foreign language is inherently more difficult for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, it could be said that poorer performance under an English Mol system is a temporary phenomenon associated with adjusting to a new medium, and that

performance may improve as students progress through secondary school. Equally, the data do not distinguish between language and possible confounders such as locations, livelihoods, cultures and preferences.

The uncertainty in the existing literature on Mol in Ethiopia therefore suggests that there is value to be gained from further empirical investigation. This Working Paper uses Young Lives' school component data to understand the implementation and implications of EETP's language provisions.

## 2. Methods<sup>2</sup>

Round 1 of The Young Lives school component survey was conducted in 2010 in Ethiopia. The purpose of this component was to gather information on the quality of the Younger Cohort children's schooling and to investigate the effectiveness of policy initiatives to improve educational quality.

### 2.1 Sampling

In 2002, a sentinel site surveillance was conducted by an Ethiopian research team. The team purposively selected 20 sites across five regions that accounted for 96 per cent of the Ethiopian population (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, SNNP region and Tigray). Owing to the absence of appropriate demographic data, the research team consulted local officials to ensure a balanced representation of rural poor, urban poor and relatively less poor urban sentinel sites in each region. A village within each sentinel site was randomly selected and interviews with periphery households were conducted until 150 eligible households were identified. One hundred households with 1-year-old children and 50 households with 8-year-old children were then randomly selected in each site, yielding a sample of 3,000 children, consisting of two age cohorts.

For the school component survey, a sub-sample of Young Lives children was selected, with a view to finding a balance between capturing as many children as possible and a reasonable breadth of different kinds of schools. Children were sampled from both the Younger and Older Cohorts, and siblings of the selected Older Cohort children were also included. In rural areas, all schools attended by a Young Lives child were surveyed. This was not possible in urban areas, where greater choice means that children are more widely dispersed between schools; as such, 40 per cent of Younger and Older Cohort urban children were selected. Issues of sequencing the school component with other elements of the Young Lives study meant it was not possible to track children who had migrated outside of Young Lives sites, nor children who live in a Young Lives site but go to school outside it.

Key features of the sites sampled (names anonymised) are included in Table 6.

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2 This section reproduces and adapts text from Young Lives (2011); Alemu et al. (2003) and Outes-Leon and Sanchez (2008).

**Table 6.** *Main features and official Mol policies of the areas from which the sample schools were drawn<sup>a</sup>*

Anonymised woreda names	Description	Mol policy of the area
Bertukan	An overcrowded area in the centre of the capital city, Addis Ababa.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grade 7 →: English
Duba	An industrial area in the southern part of the capital city, Addis Ababa.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grade 7 →: English
Menderin	A slum area in the capital city, Addis Ababa.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grade 7 →: English
Kok	A tourist town in the Amhara region, with some extremely poor neighbourhoods.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grades 7–8: MTE but English for maths and sciences Grade 9 →: English
Muz	A poor rural community in the Amhara region.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grades 7–8: MTE but English for maths and sciences Grade 9 →: English
Enkoy	A rural area near Lake Tana in the Amhara region.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grades 7–8: MTE but English for maths and sciences Grade 9 →: English
Tach-Meret	A rural food-insecure area in the Amhara region.	Grades 1–6: MTE Grades 7–8: MTE but English for maths and sciences Grade 9 →: English
Leki	A rural area near lake Ziway in the Oromia region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Lomi	A drought-prone rural area in the Oromia region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Ananas	A fast-growing town in the Oromia region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Dinich	A relatively rich rural area in the outskirts of Debrezeit town in the Oromia region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Timatim	A densely populated rural area growing <i>enset</i> ('false banana') in the SNNP region.	Grades 1–4: MTE Grade 5 →: English
Shenkurt	A densely populated town in the SNNP region.	Grades 1–4: MTE Grade 5 →: English
Leku	A fast-growing business and tourist town in the SNNP region.	Grades 1–4: MTE Grade 5 →: English
Buna	A coffee-growing rural area in the SNNP region.	Grades 1–4: MTE Grade 5 →: English
Weyn	A poor and densely populated rural community in the SNNP region.	Grades 1–4: MTE Grade 5 →: English
Zeytuni	A drought-prone rural area highly dependent on government support in the Tigray region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Selata	An extremely poor rural area dependent on the Productive Safety Net Scheme and other government support in the Tigray region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Gomen	A small, very poor urban town in the Tigray region.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Beles	A model rural area in the Tigray region known for its success in soil and water conservation.	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Bertukan	An overcrowded area in the centre of the capital city, Addis Ababa	Grades 1–6: MTE Grade 7 →: English
Tach-Meret	A rural food-insecure area in the Amhara region	Grades 1–6: MTE Grades 7–8: MTE but English for maths and sciences Grade 9 →: English
Leki	A rural area near Lake Ziway in the Oromia region	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English
Leku	A fast-growing business and tourist region in the SNNP region	Grades 1–4: MTE Grade 5 →: English
Zeytuni	A drought-prone rural area highly dependent on government support in the Tigray region	Grades 1–8: MTE Grade 9 →: English

<sup>a</sup> Shaded areas indicate the sub-sample of schools in which qualitative interviews took place.

As is made clear from Table 6, the data are drawn from a diverse range of socio-economic and cultural contexts, thus ensuring that the findings (while not nationally representative) have a higher degree of credibility. The study sites also make it possible to explore the strengths and challenges of different approaches to Mol. For instance, ten sites officially use MTE until Grade 8, while six sites make the transition to English as Mol much earlier (Grade 5). All sites are in areas that introduce English as a subject (foreign language rather than Mol) from Grade 1.

## 2.2 Data collection

Young Lives uses a combination of up to eight separate instruments to collect school data. This Working Paper relies on data from the teacher questionnaire. The teacher questionnaire collects personal details and attitudes of a teacher of a Young Lives child (or sibling included in the sample), and general information about the teaching methods and classroom procedures for the classes in which the sampled children are studying.

In addition to these instruments, this Working Paper also draws data from in-depth interviews conducted with Young Lives teachers, headteachers and pupils in 16 schools. The interviews explored teachers' and headteachers' views on policy interventions and pupils' experiences of school. Relevant interview topics with respect to each category of participant are summarised in Table 7.

**Table 7.** *Relevant interview topics covered, by category of participant*

Category	Topics
<b>Headteachers and teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of whether learning in mother tongue aids understanding</li> <li>• Attitude to current school language policies</li> <li>• Description of problems in applying school language policies (i.e. view as to whether students understand the language of textbooks; ability to find qualified teachers, etc.)</li> <li>• Perception of local attitudes to school language policies</li> </ul>
<b>Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance in and understanding of various subjects</li> <li>• Attitude to current school language policies</li> <li>• Description of any difficulties associated with school language policies</li> </ul>

## 2.3 Data analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed with a view to answering the following broad research question:

*What does the school component tell us about how the EETP has been experienced by relevant stakeholders (students and educators)?*

The 'experiential' focus of the question is well suited to interview and survey data gathered from questions that ask participants to report personal views and practices.

Four sub-questions were devised to support the research objective – namely:

1. What level of support is there for the EETP language model?
2. What are considered to be the positive aspects of MTE at the primary school level?
3. What are considered to be the negative aspects of MTE at the primary school level?
4. How closely is the EETP language model being adhered to in practice?

Descriptive statistics for relevant items in the teacher questionnaires were analysed using STATA, and results were disaggregated according to teacher characteristics (i.e. region of residence, urban/rural location).

All interview transcripts were reviewed and recurring themes relevant to the research questions were recoded inductively according to the process set out in Table 8.

**Table 8.** *Inductive coding process*

Initial read through text data	Identify specific segments of information	Label the segments of information to create categories	Reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories	Create a model incorporating most important categories
Many pages of text	Many segments of text	30–40 categories	15–20 categories	3–8 categories

Source: Thomas (2003: Table 1)

The final themes used to code the transcripts were as follows:

- Resistance to the introduction of MTE
- View that MTE for a period of time is useful
- Potential problems of MTE
- First cycle MTE followed by the use of English as Mol in higher grades is problematic<sup>3</sup>
- Level of adherence to use of English as Mol
- View as to whether EETP language provisions ought to be revised.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Resistance to the introduction of MTE

In-depth interviews with teachers and headteachers revealed that some parents were initially sceptical of the introduction of MTE. The scepticism was broadly attributable to two factors. First, some parents are reported not to have seen the value of teaching students in a language in which they were already conversant; rather, they believed that the role of education was to widen knowledge by teaching a new language:

There was a wrong perception about, ‘What would be the future of children learning in mother tongue? What is the need of learning in their mother tongue as they already know the language?’... Due to this, they said, ‘If they are learning in this language it means that there is nothing that they learn. ...’

(Teacher, primary school, rural Oromia)

<sup>3</sup> ‘First cycle’ refers to the first cycle of primary education (Grades 1 to 4), while ‘second cycle’ refers to Grades 5 to 8.

Many parents complained that their children already know [mother tongue] and want them to study in Amharic. There are some who still ask ... They thought that their children are not showing improvement since they couldn't speak with them in Amharic.

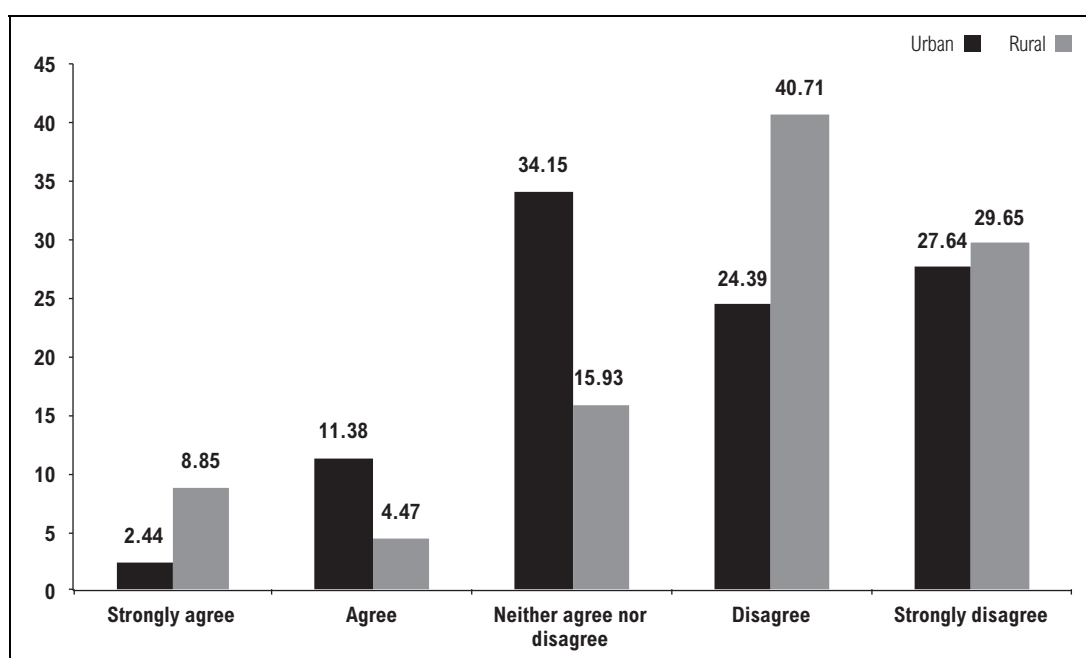
(Headteacher, primary school, rural Oromia)

Second, the data suggested that some parents did not equate MTE with knowledge or quality education. For example, a teacher in a primary school in an urban area in the SNNP region said, '[P]arents were saying the government should not pay money for these teachers who teach local language because they never consider [mother tongue] as knowledge.' A teacher in a primary school in rural Tigray reported a similar view, saying, 'At first they were thinking that English was the criteri[on] for quality education'.

Despite these reports of initial scepticism, some of the interviewees expressed the view that parents had largely come either to accept MTE or at least to see its advantages. According to one primary school teacher in rural Tigray, 'when the students start to talk about what they learned, I think they [the parents] start to understand the advantage of mother tongue'.

This perception is consistent with the quantitative data, which were compiled from surveys of a larger sample of Young Lives teachers. As Figure 3 demonstrates, a majority of teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'Many parents support children being taught all their subjects in English', with more rural teachers believing that parents preferred some use of languages other than English. A chi-squared test confirmed that there was a statistically significant difference on the overall response pattern between urban and rural areas (1 per cent level).

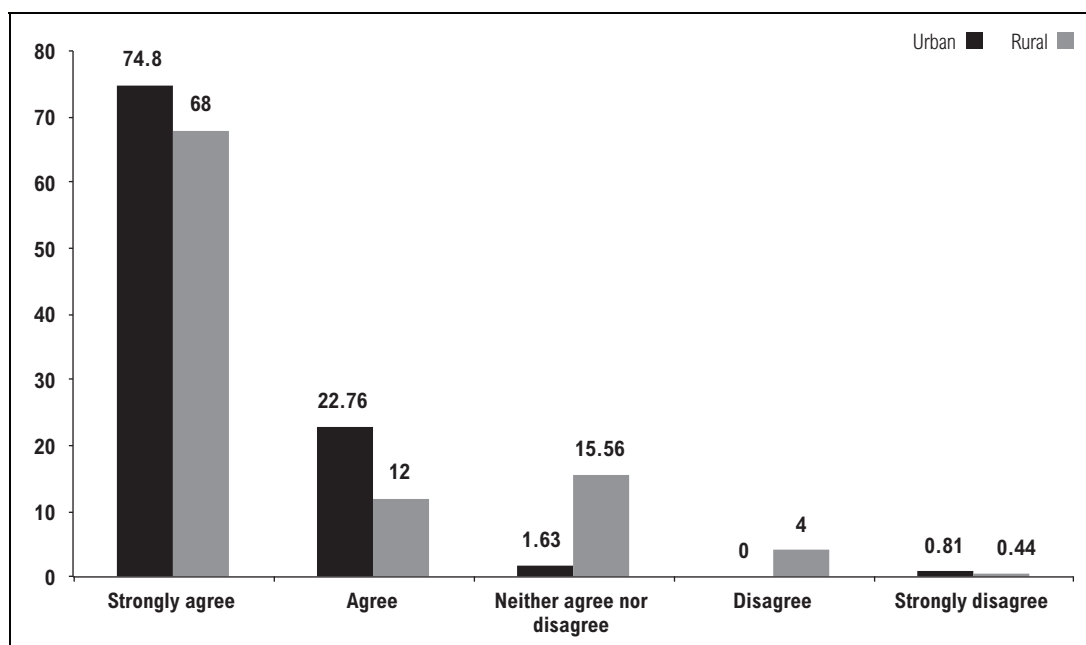
**Figure 3.** *Teachers' responses to the statement 'Many parents support children being taught all their subjects in English' (%)*



Note: Graph shows percentages of total responses in urban (n=123) and rural (n=226) areas.

Among the surveyed teachers, a large majority agreed with the statement ‘Mother tongue education is the right of every child’ (Figure 4), although it is unclear whether support for the statement equated to approval of MTE, or merely a belief that the EETP confers a ‘right’. A chi-squared test confirmed that there was a statistically significant difference on the overall response pattern in urban and rural areas (1 per cent level).

**Figure 4.** *Teachers’ responses to the statement ‘MTE is the right of every child’ (%)*



Note: Graph shows percentages of total responses in urban (n=123) and rural (n=225) areas.

### 3.2 View that MTE for a period of time is useful

The qualitative data reveal two broad types of reasons for the support of some degree of MTE. First, some interviewees suggested that MTE helps students to develop a better understanding of the subject matter than would be the case if another language was used from the outset. A headteacher in rural Tigray explained the usefulness of MTE in the following terms:

Learning with our language enables us to explain our thoughts as we like and also to listen correctly to the message we are told ... Although English helps us communicate with others, it might be an obstacle to understand the concepts of the subject matters ... When we see them [students] learning in their language, they ask right questions as it pleases them. But if it was in [another] language there may be intimidation and shy[ness], saying, ‘I don’t know it. I may be mistaken. I will be laughed at ...’

The notion that non-MTE may inhibit students from asking questions was echoed in the following response:

I believe it [MTE] helps them a lot because when they learn in another language they are beginning with something they do not know ... [L]earning in their own mother tongue is good because they can understand it easily and ask questions if they can’t understand it. If it is in another language they cannot ask questions because they can’t speak it well.

(Teacher, primary school, Addis Ababa)

Aside from perceived pedagogical advantages, another explanation for the support of MTE is that it serves an important social function. The headteacher of a primary school in rural Amhara considered that '[l]earning with mother tongue language is vital in every society because it enables the students to understand and identify with the community'.

### 3.3 Potential problems of MTE

Despite some degree of recognition of the benefits of MTE, the interview data revealed a number of potential problems associated with its application in Ethiopia. In particular, teachers reported that sometimes it is difficult to find words to express key education concepts in the mother tongue. A headteacher in rural Tigray said, '[t]here is some confusion when the English words, such as the words in chemistry and physics, do not have direct translation in [the mother tongue]'. Another headteacher from the same area concurred: 'There are sometimes difficult words for me to explain in [mother tongue] such as speed, acceleration, power, x-axis, y-axis and the like'.

It was also said that the policy also has the potential to cause problems for students and teachers whose mother tongue is different from that used at the school. For instance, a primary school teacher in a town in the SNNP region, shared the following experience:

After I took training I was assigned in one of the zones in this region; the [language of instruction] was difficult for me. Since I cannot speak the language in the zone, I taught with English. I also used Amharic language ... [W]hen I made them count Amharic words I [encountered] problems. This is because they [did not] know the language and I [did not] know their tongue. Since I [did] not know their language I taught them in Amharic and I did not understand when they told me their language.

There were also two reported instances of rural primary students having to drop out of school or move to another school on account of language barriers. One student came from Sidama (a zone in SNNPR) and had difficulties understanding Amharic, and another 'couldn't adjust to' Oromiffa (teacher, rural Oromia). The two interviewees reporting the issue thought that it was a minor concern and that only a small number of students were affected. This is consistent with the results of the survey in which no teachers listed language as one of the top three reasons that children were turned away from a school.

Another minor source of concern emerging from the qualitative data was that some local languages comprise different dialects, hence creating confusion between students and teachers even where they speak the same mother tongue. A headteacher in rural Tigray explained the potential dilemma thus:

[H]ere there are different dialects which they use ... only in the district ... To give direct translation may create confusion. For example, there is a word *kirayat* which means in the nearby district 'many' but when you go to the other place it will have another meaning.

Ultimately, however, interviewees considered that the problem was easily rectified.

### 3.4 First cycle MTE followed by the use of English as Mol in higher grades is problematic

A number of the students interviewed reported being apprehensive about the transition from MTE to English-medium education because of their poor English language skills. For instance, a Grade 8 student in rural Oromia said the following:

I feel afraid when I think that all the subjects would be in English because I have a difficulty with understanding English. I feel ashamed thinking that people would ridicule me saying that I can't speak English after reaching Grade 9...

A primary school teacher in Addis Ababa suggested that such problems were not uncommon:

In a school where I taught before, it was not [permitted] to speak Amharic ... In that school there were many students who cr[ie]d and even refused to come to school. Those who have learned English well have no problems. But the new ones suffer a lot. They cry and finally leave the school and go home ... [T]here are students who run away from the school. There are others who do not ask questions because they can't speak English. They want to ask questions but they keep quiet.

The survey data confirm that in all sampled regions, there are students who have limited grasp of English in schools where the Mol is English. While the sample numbers are small, the results nevertheless demonstrate that English is not universally understood. For instance, in response to the question 'What proportion of students can understand a maths lesson?' in schools where the medium of instruction is English, no teachers answered 'Most or all' in Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia or Tigray (Table 9), although it is important to note that some of the responses may have been provided by teachers of lower grades in schools where English is introduced in higher grades. Moreover, it is possible that the reason for the lack of understanding relates to the subject matter rather than the Mol. However, Table 10 indicates that only a minority of the overall sample of teachers believed that most or all of their students could read a sentence written in English.

**Table 9.** *Teachers' responses to the question 'What proportion of students can understand a maths lesson?' by region (in schools where the Mol in maths lessons is English)*

Proportion	Addis Ababa	Amhara	Oromia	SNNP	Tigray	Total
Most or all	0	0	0	1	0	1
More than half	1	3	3	11	0	18
Less than half but more than a quarter	5	8	0	18	0	31
Less than a quarter	0	4	0	1	1	6
Few or none	2	0	3	6	3	13
Total	8	15	6	37	4	70

Note: Surveyed teachers were distributed across all the grades in which there were Young Lives children; data relate to schools in some or all classes/grades are taught in English.

**Table 10.** *Teachers' responses to the question 'What proportion of students can read a sentence in written English?' by region*

Proportion	Addis Ababa	Amhara	Oromia	SNNP	Tigray	Total
Most or all	5	4	3	14	0	36
More than half	3	10	0	15	4	67
Less than half but more than a quarter	0	1	3	0	0	59
Less than a quarter	0	0	0	1	0	32
Few or none	0	0	0	7	0	129
Total	8	15	6	37	4	323

Note: Surveyed teachers were distributed across all the grades in which there were Young Lives children; data relate to schools in which all or some classes/grades are taught in English.

Three explanations for some students' limited grasp of English emerged from the interview data. First, it was noted that, unlike in some other African countries, English is not widely used in the media, in administration or in day-to-day life in Ethiopia. According to one headteacher in rural Amhara: 'The main challenge in our society regarding English in general is lack of confidence in speaking the language.' This means that students must often rely solely on the education system to provide the requisite language skills and are limited in their ability to practise the language outside of school.

Second, there was a perception that not enough time is devoted to teaching English as a subject in primary school. A primary school teacher in Addis Ababa offered the following observation:

One reason [students cannot communicate in English after learning it as a subject for seven or eight years] may be limited number of periods assigned for English. There are only six periods per week assigned for English ... These six periods are mainly used to teach grammar. There is not much time to learn conversation.

Third, it was a commonly reported concern that teachers often do not have the requisite skills and training to teach English as a subject and/or to teach other subjects in English. A headteacher in rural Oromia was of the view that 'teachers are not trained in how to teach English'. The following quotation captures the experience of one student in Addis Ababa:

In high school I am not good at English. Our English teacher is very poor in the subject. She cannot teach well. Most students say that they know better than her. She knows nothing ... When she gives us class work, she simply reads the title passage and tells us to do the questions. She does not tell us what to do. We students help each other and do the questions.

Of 340 teachers surveyed, 44.12 per cent had never participated in an English Language Improvement Program.

### 3.5 Level of adherence to use of English as Mol

The school component data produced evidence that English was not used exclusively (or, sometimes, at all) in schools where it served as the Mol. While the survey question 'What language do you use to teach and communicate with students for the majority?' had a number of missing responses, Table 11 shows that 14 teachers in schools where the official medium of instruction was English reported using a language other than English. It is important to note that the sample size is small because responses to this question were not well reported.

**Table 11.** *Teachers' responses to the question 'What language do you use to teach and communicate with students for the majority of the time?' by region (in schools where the Mol is English)*

Language	Amhara	Oromia	SNNP
Amharic	7	0	2
Oromiffa	0	3	0
Sidama	0	0	1
English	0	0	22
Total	7	3	25

Interview responses suggested that the reason for departing from English Mol is linked to the foregoing discussion of students' capacity to understand English (see Section 3.4 above). A primary school maths teacher in Addis Ababa said:

After explaining in English, I gave exercises and left the class. They did not understand anything. Later on, they slipped out of the class and, one by one, began asking me questions. They said they did not understand. I told them the same thing in Amharic and it did not take those ten minutes to do it. Beginning that day on, I began to teach them [in] both languages.

### 3.6 View as to whether EETP language provisions ought to be revised

The problems associated with transitioning students to English Mol in secondary school led some of the teachers and headteachers interviewed to advocate an earlier exit from MTE (i.e. English Mol during the first cycle or from Grade 5). This is confirmed in the survey data. Table 12 below shows that an overall majority of the surveyed teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'English should be introduced as a medium of instruction in the first cycle so students can cope better in secondary school'. Oromia was the only sampled region in which the majority of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

**Table 12.** *Teachers' responses to the statement 'English should be used as a medium of instruction in the first cycle so students can cope better in secondary school', by region*

Response	Addis Ababa	Amhara	Oromia	SNNP	Tigray	Total
Strongly agree	10 (38.46)	25 (26.60)	22 (25.00)	35 (50.72)	35 (48.61)	127 (36.39)
Agree	10 (38.46)	59 (62.77)	15 (17.05)	14 (20.29)	22 (30.56)	120 (34.38)
Neither agree nor disagree	0 (0.00)	5 (5.32)	0 (0.00)	10 (14.49)	0 (0.00)	15 (4.30)
Disagree	5 (19.23)	2 (2.13)	42 (47.73)	9 (13.04)	15 (20.83)	73 (20.92)
Strongly disagree	1 (3.85)	3 (3.19)	9 (10.23)	1 (1.45)	0 (0.00)	14 (4.01)
Total	26 (100.00)	94 (100.00)	88 (100.00)	69 (100.00)	72 (100.00)	349 (100.00)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.

## 4. Discussion and further research

At first blush, the foregoing findings present an apparent paradox. On the one hand, there is evidence of strong support for some degree of MTE. Just over 52 per cent of urban teachers and 70.36 per cent of rural teachers surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that 'Many parents support children being taught all their subjects in English'. In the interview data, teachers and headteachers also acknowledged the value of MTE in the sense that it was perceived to facilitate proper understanding and foster an environment in which students feel as though they can ask questions without inhibition. Both qualitative and quantitative data suggested that it was not uncommon for teachers to revert to a mother tongue, even where the official Mol was English.

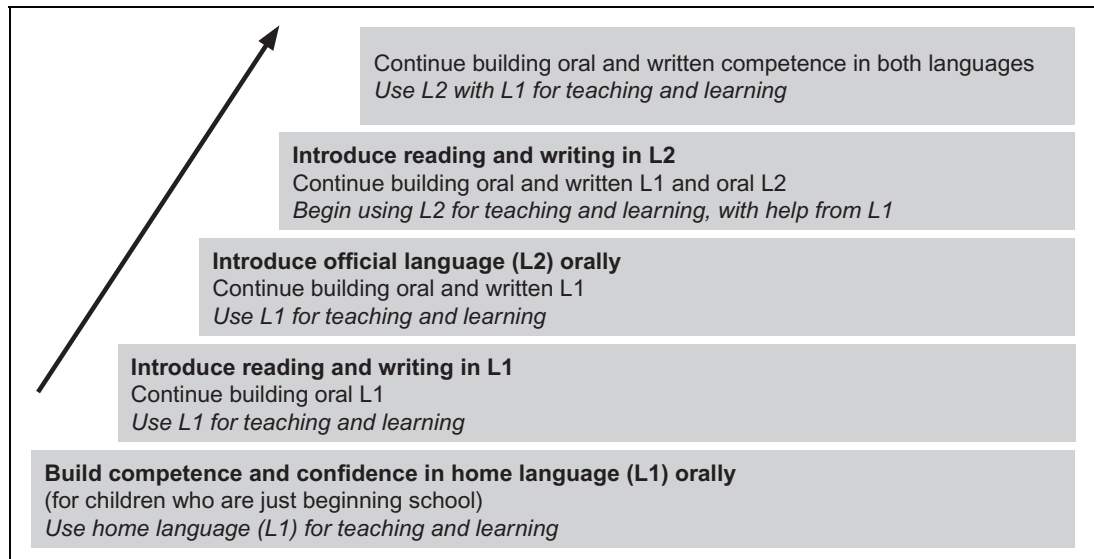
On the other hand, an overall majority of surveyed teachers believed that English should be introduced as the Mol in the first cycle of primary education so that students can cope better in secondary school. The interview data revealed instances of students being unable to cope with the transition to English Mol in second cycle and secondary school on account of having a poor grasp of the language.

Thus, despite recognition that MTE may have pedagogical advantages when considered in isolation, teachers question its appropriateness in the context of a policy that requires English to become the Mol for secondary education (EETP, clause 3.5.5).

The literature suggests that there may be a way of supporting students' pedagogical needs by using MTE in early years while still ensuring that an appropriate groundwork is laid for their smooth transition to English-medium education in later years. The model proposed in Figure 5 suggests that developing the students' competence and confidence in the mother tongue ought to be a priority in early school years, and that English should be introduced as a subject shortly thereafter, as is the case in Ethiopia (although the school component data raise questions about the quality of English subject teaching). However, unlike in Ethiopia where the practice is to abruptly substitute one Mol for another, the model recommends gradually introducing English as a Mol *with help from the mother tongue*. The model is based on the following logic:

- Education begins with what learners already know, building on the language and culture, knowledge and experience that they bring with them when they start school;
- Learners gradually gain confidence in using the new [second] language, before it becomes the only language for teaching academic subjects; and
- Learners achieve grade level competence in each subject because teachers use their [mother tongue], along with the [second] language, to help them understand the academic concepts (UNESCO 2007).

**Figure 5.** *The progression of language learning in strong multilingual education programmes*



Source: UNESCO (2007)

Research from other countries suggests that early exit (from MTE) models do not result in improved English language competency (see Alidou et al. 2006: 67–70 for a summary). For instance, a study of a migrant education programme in the United States found that the longer MTE was retained, the better the students' language achievement was in both the mother tongue and in English (Ramirez et al. 1991). The same study also produced evidence that longer periods of MTE may be associated with better performance in other subjects such as mathematics (Ramirez et al. 1991).

The challenge in the Ethiopian context is for policymakers to avoid acting on some teachers' demands for an early exit model in the absence of strong evidence that MTE leads to worse educational outcomes in higher grades. In particular, future research should:

- compile longitudinal data tracing student performance over time for a sample of schools purposively selected to include different language models (i.e. those in which MTE ends in Grade 4, Grade 8, etc.), taking care to monitor to what extent the schools' stated language policies are being adhered to in practice;
- devise a way to measure the standard of English teaching as a *subject* at lower levels of education, and include the variable in future multiple regression analyses for educational outcomes (similar to that in Table 5 above);
- devise a way to measure the standard of teachers' English where English is the MoI, and include the variable in future multiple regression analyses for educational outcomes (similar to that in Table 5 above).

There might be a strong argument for retaining MTE in first and second cycles if it can be shown that poor student performance is correlated with teachers' English use/proficiency rather than late exit from MTE (as the school component data suggest). The policy priority might then shift to improving teachers' language skills.

Of course, in conducting this research, the potential pitfalls of MTE ought not to be overlooked. The findings show that MTE can create access problems for minority students (i.e. those attending schools in regions where their own mother tongue is not spoken);<sup>4</sup> restrict the ability of teachers to seek employment outside of their own linguistic regions; and cause a teacher shortage in regions where the number of trained teachers is low, such as the SNNP region.

Since Ethiopian national stability is facilitated by positive interactions between individuals from different ethnic and regional groups, it is also important to ensure that the MTE model does not become a tool for segregation or an impediment to inter-group understanding. In a study of inter-group relations among 188 Ethiopian university students, 65 per cent of respondents 'reported that they were unable to make friends from ethnic out-group members due to the language barrier' (Semela 2012: 345). The Young Lives data offer a possible explanation as to why English or Amharic do not serve to overcome local language barriers in so far as they suggest that some students feel embarrassed or self-conscious using a second language. Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002: 611) note that '[a]nxiety and apprehension directly associated with communication barriers [have] been shown to predict inimical attitudes toward ethnolinguistic outgroups'. Another explanation is that the political significance of using local languages may create a level of tension that deters inter-group exchanges.

In addition, one needs to be alive to the possibility that MTE is resulting in poorly skilled teachers being assigned to schools simply because they speak the mother tongue. Alemu and Tekleselassie (2011: 403) have noted that 'in some disadvantaged regions, individuals as under-qualified as seventh grade drop outs were assigned ... as primary teachers just to fill positions by individuals who needed to speak the language'. Anecdotal evidence from recent Young Lives survey research in the Afar region suggested that a teacher with one year of post-qualification experience had been promoted to headteacher because he was the only teacher who spoke Afar; while the individual may have been capable, the example raises the possibility that unmeritorious appointments based on language rather than teaching skill are occurring elsewhere.

## 5. Conclusion

There exist only a handful of studies on Mol in Ethiopia. The Young Lives school component data are consistent with many of the qualitative findings in Heugh et al.'s (2007) report on medium of instruction in Ethiopian primary schools, particularly its findings in relation to the quality of teaching of and in the English language. The unique contributions of the school component study include the finding that a large majority of surveyed teachers favour an abolition or reduction of MTE. However, in light of the international studies which put forward a convincing case for late exit from MTE, this finding ought to convey the urgency with which more Ethiopia-specific research in this area is needed. In particular, the qualitative data from the school component study suggest that more attention needs to be given to understanding English teaching proficiency in Ethiopia, both as a foreign language subject at primary level and as Mol from Grades 5, 7, 8 or 9 (depending on the region). Such research may establish

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4 Although a similar problem might exist if English or Amharic was the Mol.

that the solution to improving educational outcomes is not an earlier introduction of English MoI, but rather a longer and improved transition to the language through mechanisms such as better teacher training in use of the English language and an increased focus on the pedagogy of teaching it as a subject.

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# Policy and Practice on Language of Instruction in Ethiopian Schools: Findings from the Young Lives School Survey

Education policies regarding language of instruction are hotly debated in countries where the population speaks multiple languages, including English. On the one hand, there is research to suggest that educating students in their mother tongue results in improved educational outcomes because it facilitates understanding of new concepts and strengthens affective measures such as self-esteem, identity, motivation and creativity. On the other hand, some argue that mother tongue education disadvantages students in some contexts, particularly where languages are not sufficiently developed to express modern concepts in fields such as mathematics and science. It is therefore important to investigate the benefits and challenges of language of instruction policies on a case-by-case basis since education is never conducted in a vacuum; rather, the effects of educational policies are necessarily influenced by broader structural forces and individuals' lived experiences. This paper uses qualitative and quantitative data from the 2010 Young Lives school survey to examine the arguments around language of instruction in the Ethiopian context.



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## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

## Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*
- *Save the Children (Ethiopia programme)*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
- *University of Oxford, UK*

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