

Teachers' Practice and Perception on the Use of Amharic Language in the EFL Classes of Ethiopia

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perception and practice on the use of Amharic language in the EFL classes. To achieve this objective, focus group discussion and key informant interview was conducted with six and three first year TEFL PhD students (2016 entry) of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia respectively. The participants had varied experience of teaching English at different Ethiopian Universities, and they were selected using simple random sampling. The data obtained from both data gathering tools was recorded and transcribed in verbatim. Then, it was coded using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Finally, the results were analyzed qualitatively. The finding showed that almost all of the teachers had negative perception towards the use of Amharic language in the EFL classes. It was found that there exists a gap between teachers practice and perception on the use of Amharic in their EFL classroom due to endogenous and exogenous factors. Though they had a negative perception towards the use of Amharic in the ELT classes, they use it mostly for non-language purposes and rarely for language purposes. Though the participants had varied experience of teaching English, they all had negative perception on the use of Amharic. This study also found that all the more experienced and less experienced teachers use Amharic for non-language purposes. This indicates that experience doesn't bring any change on the teachers' use of Amharic for language and non-language purposes. Besides, highly experienced teachers used Amharic due to exogenous factors whereas less experienced teaches used it due to indigenous factors.

Keywords

Teachers' perception and practice; use of Amharic language; EFL classes; purposes; factors

Introduction

There has been a longstanding debate over whether the use of students' L1 in EFL classes should be avoided or welcomed. Some scholars argue that L1 should be used neither by students nor by teachers. A monolingual approach suggests that the target language solely in EFL classroom increases the learning of the target language (Bhooth, Azman, and Ismail, 2014). Kayaoglu, Öztürk and DagAkbas (2010) said that the use of L1 is associated with inadequacy and lack of expertise in language teaching. Nation (2003) also warns that using the mother tongue in the classroom reduces the amount of input and the opportunity of practice for the target language. According to these scholars, for students who learn English as a foreign language, it is the target language that exposes them to have an input whereas the use of L1 impedes the students' exposure to the target language. So it has to be avoided.

Paker and Karaagac (2015), Blackman (2014), Mart (2013), and Cook (2001), however, stated that the use of L1 in EFL/ESL classroom facilitates rather than impeding the target language learning. They added that the use of only the target language is unfashionable to the 21 century of language learning. Littlewood and Yu (2011) identified that there is still a lack of agreement on whether the student's L1 has a place in the classroom or, if it does, what that role is.

Having such opposite findings, from my experience of being a TEFL teacher, I faced a dilemma whether the Amharic should or shouldn't be used in the EFL classes. This inspires me to conduct a research on this area. This study was, therefore, designed to explore teachers' practice in the use of Amharic in the EFL teaching and learning and their perception towards using it.

To investigate this, the following research questions were designed.

- 1) How do teachers perceive the use of Amharic in the EFL classes?
- 2) How is the teachers practice in the use of Amharic in the EFL teaching?
- 3) When or for what purpose do teachers use Amharic in the EFL, if any?
- 4) What factors affect teachers to use or not to use Amharic in the EFL classes?

Research Methodology

As stated before, this project was designed to investigate teachers' perception and practice on the use of Amharic in the EFL classes. To investigate answers for the above listed basic questions, interview guide was prepared. Next, FGD and key informant interview was conducted with six and three first year TEFL PhD students of 2016 entry respectively. The total number of the 2016 entry students who were attending their PhD in Addis Ababa University in TEFL were 32. The participants were teaching English at different Ethiopian universities, and at the time of conducting this research, they were students of Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. These participants were selected using simple random sampling because simple random sampling gives equal chance for all students to be selected. The interview was semi-structured interview since it helps the researcher to probe questions. The data obtained from both the interview and the FGD was recorded and transcribed in verbatim. Then, it was coded using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Finally, it was analyzed qualitatively.

Table 1. Information about Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Participants

SN	Code of Participant	Educational Status	Experience of Teaching English	Sex
1	01	MA	5 years	M
2	02	MA	7 years	M
3	03	MA	5 years	M
4	04	MA	7 years	M
5	05	MA	15 years	M
6	06	MA	years	M

Table 2. Information about Key Informant Interview (KII) Participants

SN	Code of Participant	Educational Status	Experience of Teaching English	Sex
1	01	MA	10 years	M
2	02	MA	5 years	M
3	03	MA	4 years	M

Findings, Discussions, and Conclusions

Teachers' Perception on the Use of Amharic in the EFL Classes

Almost all of the participants of this study had negative perception towards the use of Amharic in their ELT classes. They forwarded that Ethiopian universities have multilingual students. They added that Amharic is not a mother tongue to many of the students. Due to this, many students do not listen Amharic. Students who come from villages of all corners of Ethiopia, which consists the majority of students, couldn't listen even a single Amharic word. Speaking Amharic for these students is, therefore, simply wastage of time.

Since the students are heterogeneous and have different ethnicity, you can get ten... twenty... or thirty languages in the class, and if I select Amharic from all these languages, it is bias. Those who speak Amharic will understand, and those who can't will not. This is bias or discrimination. So we are not expected to create bias as we are teachers [FGD, 03].

This idea seems similar to Polio and Duff (1994) who says, "Ban the L1 in the classroom" (Polio and Duff, 1994, p.22). According to them, the use of only L2 is seen as positive whereas the use of students L1 is seen as negative. This means the L1 is not something to be utilized in the teaching of SL/FL, but to be set aside. Cook (2001) also supports this participants' idea by saying "Only in circumstances where the teacher does not speak the students' L1 or the students have different L1s, the banning of the L1 in the classroom could be achieved" (Cook, 2001, p.412). From this quote we understand that because Amharic was not a mother tongue to many students or because the students had different L1s, it should not be used in the EFL classroom. Besides, Amharic was not a mother tongue to many of the Ethiopian University teachers too.

The participants of this study had a negative perception on the use of Amharic in their EFL classroom due to the following reasons. For one thing, many of the students could not understand Amharic. So using Amharic is creating bias among students and killing their time than helping them. This is in line with Cook (2001) who suggests the use of L1 only with homogeneous students. Kayaoglu (2012) also said teachers should motivate all students; not for a few students. This concept is similar to this finding which declares using Amharic is creating bias among students.

Secondly, English is a foreign language to our students. So, if they could not get any input or exposure in the classroom, there is no learning. Because learning is adding something that you do not know before. This is similar to Krashen's (1985) idea. He said that target language is learnt if students get access or exposure to it by eliminating the use of L1. Kalanzadeh et al (2013) also found teachers to be reluctant to use L1 (Persian) in L2 (English) classes on the grounds that any minutes of using L1 will diminish a minute of students exposure to L2.

Thirdly, the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation declares that English should be the medium of instruction. So, using Amharic at higher institutions is violating the rules and regulations of the higher education proclamation and opposing the policy. This is similar to Blackman's (2014) finding which says the curriculum, workshops and seminars, and trainings given on the use of L1 affects teachers' perception on the use of students' L1. He added that curriculum forces teachers to use the target language only. This creates a negative perception on teachers to use the learners' L1.

Generally, the teachers believed that Amharic should not be used in the EFL classes. This negative perception was created because the students had different L1s, to expose the students with the target language, and the curriculum declares teachers to use English. But, though the curriculum states English to be used as a medium of instruction, it neither condemns nor permits the use of Amharic.

Teachers' Practice on the Use of Amharic in the EFL Classes

Though a very few of the participants of this study did not use Amharic for various reasons, the majority of them used it in their EFL classes. As Blackman (2014) said sometimes is subjective. It cannot be quantified. Accordingly, when they were asked to explain or quantify what they meant, they said that it is difficult to put it in percentage because they used English

unless some situations forced them to use Amharic. That is why they got difficult to explain it in quantity.

Many researchers pointed out that the use of the students L1 has a lot of benefits in EFL/ESL learning. But, they do not come up with a consistent result on the amount of how much percent of the students L1 to be used in the EFL classroom. Mahmutoglu and Kicir (2013) found that the L1 has to be used 20-40% of the classroom. Blackman (2014), Kalanzadeh et al (2013), and Nazary (2008) found that 25%, 10%, and 5% of the students L1 to be used in the EFL classroom respectively. This shows that very few amount of L1 has to be used in the EFL learning and teaching, and there is no rule on how much to use; what matters is that it depends on various situations.

The teachers are found to use Amharic sometimes for various purposes. These purposes are categorized in to two, and these are called language purposes and non-language or administrative purposes.

Administrative/Non-language Purposes

Almost all of the participants of this study forwarded that they use Amharic sometimes when managing their students sitting arrangements, and before and after their lesson. They also revealed that they used when the students were not clear with the instructions given them to do tasks. Besides they said that they used Amharic to warm up or for motivating their students if they feel tired or bored. They also used it when they take attendance, when they greet the students, and when they advise their students.

...when I talk about other issues such as sitting arrangements of may be time or before and after I finish my lesson... When I enter to the classroom, before I start my lesson, if students ask me in Amharic, I respond them in Amharic. For example if they ask me saying "When we will meet next time" in Amharic, I simply respond them in Amharic [FGD, 01].

Inline to this, FGD participant number 5 said "The only time I use Amharic is when I totally couldn't communicate with my students especially when I give them some activities and when they are not clear with the instruction". Supporting this idea, participant of FGD number 4 said "I use it to motivate my students, but not for teaching and learning purposes. And sometimes during group work, when the need come from the students, when they ask me in Amharic". FGD participant number 2 also expressed "I use Amharic to warm up for activities and also for greeting sometimes and even when I take attendance".

The findings of this study has consistency with Duff and Polio (1990) finding which states teachers use L1 for non-language reasons. The non-language functions are related to interpersonal reasons and for classroom management. All of the above listed situations are therefore related to these purposes. Afzal (2013), Atkinson (1987), and Choong (2006) also said most teachers use mother tongue for non-language or administrative issues. By administrative issues he meant that the management of the classroom or any personal related affairs. Atkinson (1993) and Cook (2001) also found that teachers use L1 for non-language functions such as classroom management, developing student-teacher relationships, and providing feedback.

Language Purposes

It is found that some of the participants of this study used Amharic to show the grammatical relationship of Amharic and English, to explain difficult words or vocabulary, to explain complex concepts, and if students face them difficulty of understanding any issue, and when

the students asked them or need them to use Amharic. Participant of FGD number 4 said “This helps the students to see the relationship between the languages”. Other participants of the study also said as follows.

I use Amharic when the students are not clear with the instruction and sometimes to explain complex concepts. For example in a difficult word, I try to explain them using the target language. But if they fail to understand, I tell them in Amharic if I lost any option so that they can understand [FGD, 05].

When the students couldn't understand, I help them in Amharic. If they face them difficult vocabulary, I tell them in Amharic. Therefore, depending on the situation, I use Amharic [FGD, 02].

Usually I use it when I taught a certain grammatically complex item. If I thought my students are not understanding that particular concept, I sometimes resort to Amharic. And if there are complex items, I again use Amharic [KII, 01].

With regard to the use of L1, Blackman (2014) said mother tongue can be used for two situations. These are for language and non-language purposes. Language related purposes means, as he elaborated, aspects related to writing, speaking, listening, reading, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Macaro (2001) also said teachers use L1 for language purposes example to teach grammar, vocabulary, to associate the target language with that of the L1, to check students' comprehension, and so on. As stated before, Polio and Duff (1994) also found teachers use L1 for non-language reasons such as for classroom management, administration, to empathize with learners and during communicative breakdowns; and for language functions like grammar instruction and translation of unknown vocabulary. Effective or targeted L1 use is a scaffold that extends the students zone of proximal development in the target language (ZPD) (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

Cook (1996) and Edstrom (2006) found that experienced teachers use L1 more for language purposes than for non-language purposes. They said that experienced teachers develop their ability of integrating the course they teach to the students' real life. They also master the course and how to manage their students. This helps teachers to associate and differentiate the foreign language with that of the students' mother tongue. Gomathi and Kiruthika (2013) also found experienced teachers use the mother tongue as a scaffolding tool for EFL teaching. He added that though non-language purposes of a mother tongue are very important in EFL, they can easily be managed through eye contact, facial expression, and other body languages especially those related to classroom management. Jan, Li, and Lin (2014) and Kavari (2014) revealed that experienced teachers get many opportunity of attending seminars and workshops which focus on the use of mother tongue. Due to this, they use the students L1 more for language purposes, but this doesn't mean that they don't use for administrative issues. Kalanzadeh et al (2013) forwarded that a planned and purposeful usage of L1 meets the external and internal goals of EFL learning.

One preliminary assumption is that language teaching has many goals. A broad distinction can be made between *external* goals that relate' to actual second language (L2) use outside the classroom and to *internal* goals that relate to the educational aims of the classroom itself (Cook, 2001). Choong (2006) demonstrated that the UK National Curriculum for modern languages, for instance, lays down both external goals, such as developing 'the ability to use the language effectively for the purposes of practical communication,' and internal goals, such as promoting 'learning of skills of more general application (e.g., analysis, memorizing, and drawing of inferences). This goals are achieved if the teachers use the L1 believing that it will achieve these goals.

This study, however, found that all the more experienced and less experienced teachers use Amharic for non-language purposes. This might result from the teachers' lack of opportunity to attend seminars and workshops, and lack of competence in the target language. Because there are many teachers who come to class by cramming what they will teach instead of internalizing their subject matter. On top of this, they use Amharic as a habit or tradition, not for a purpose. In such case, it would be difficult to achieve the internal and external goals of EFL learning. Look at the following abstract taken from the interview.

... I sometimes use Amharic. But I used Amharic not because of considering other issues. It is just a tradition.... But I don't consider that I do it knowingly ...I use it to motivate my students, but not for teaching and learning purposes. [FGD, 01].

To sum up, almost all of the teachers used Amharic sometimes in their EFL classes. Though a few of them were found to use Amharic for the language purposes, majority of them use it for non-language purposes. It is also found that experience doesn't bring any change on the teachers' use of Amharic for language and non-language purposes.

Factors for Varied Practice and Perception to Use Amharic in the EFL Classes

It has been found that there exists a gap between teachers practice and perception on the use of Amharic in their EFL classroom. Though they had a negative perception towards the use of Amharic in ELT classes, they used it rarely for language and mostly for non-language purposes. Edstrom (2006) also finds that teachers' beliefs or attitudes towards using L1 in the classroom can differ from how often and when they actually use it. This gap exists due to many factors, and these factors are categorized as endogenous and exogenous factors.

Endogenous Factors

Teachers were found to use Amharic because of their limited English language competence. "...it is due to English language competence by both the teachers and students that forced the use of Amharic" [KII, 01]. Since the teachers were non-natives, their English language competence was poor. Many researchers, for example Jha (2012), found that Ethiopian teachers' English language performance is poor. Blackman (2014) found varied perception and practice on the use of L1 due to teachers' limited knowledge on the target language. It was due to this reason that the teachers were found to use Amharic more for non-language purposes than for language purposes. Because, as stated before, experienced teachers use L1 more for language purposes (Cook, 1996 and Edstrom, 2006). This is to mean that had they had a good mastery of the target language, they would have used it for language purposes. From this, we can conclude that the teachers' lack of English language was one factor for teachers to have varied perception and practice with regard to the use of Amharic in their EFL classes.

The other factor that makes teachers to use Amharic was, their experience of learning English. Because they learned English by teachers who use Amharic, they teach accordingly. "Even I used to like teachers who use Amharic when I was a student because I better understood Amharic than English" [KII, 03]. This has consistency with Blackman (2014) result which found teachers' experience as learners, as one of the factors for teachers to use L1 in their EFL classes.

Fossilization also forced teachers to use Amharic in their EFL classes though they wanted not to use it. When I teach, I don't use Amharic. But when I talk about other issues such as sitting arrangements of may be time or before and after I finish my lesson, I sometimes use Amharic. But I used Amharic not because of considering other issues. It is just a tradition. ... But I don't consider that I do it knowingly [FGD, 01].

What we understand from this is that the use of Amharic cannot be banned whether we want or not since it has fossilized in our mind. In line to this, Cook (2001) states that the use of the native language is so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumptions mitigate against it. Atkinson (1987) also found teachers resort to the L1 despite their best intentions and often feeling guilty for straying from the L2 path. So the use of Amharic is a natural phenomenon.

Therefore, endogenous factors such as teachers' lack of English language proficiency, their experience as learners, and fossilization/habit were some of the factors that make teachers to use Amharic in their EFL classes though they did not want to use it.

Exogenous Factors

The students' lack of English language proficiency was found one of the factors that make teachers to use Amharic though they had negative perception on using it. "...it is due to English language competence by both the teachers and students that forced the use of Amharic" [KII, 01]. This is to mean that though teachers want to use only English in their EFL classes, their students' lack of English to understand the lesson make them to resort to use Amharic. Similar to this, Blackman (2014) found teachers to switch using L1 in their EFL classes due to their students poor English language performance. So, the teachers use Amharic to make clear any difficulty the students had since their understanding in English was poor. Because teaching using English when the students are not understanding is simply talking, not teaching.

Because the students need their teachers to use Amharic, they shift to use Amharic. "I use Amharic when the need comes from the students unless and otherwise I use English while I teach" [FGD, 02]. A teacher has to know the needs and interests of his students, and he has to teach accordingly. This is in line with Mahmutoglu and Kicir (2013) finding which says we should not work against the students. We rather should teach on the basis and interest of the students. He added that if the students level of the target language is low, we should help them elaborating on their L1, but we should not use it excessively though there is no rule on how much percent of L1 to use in the FL classes. If the students' target language is good, there will no reason to use students L1. Mouhanna (2009) finds that L1 has a greater role for new second or additional language learners with students themselves demanding L1 use. This suggests L1 has a language function, at least for students who are less proficient in the TL. In particular, L1 can provide support as a scaffold in developing students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, the teachers used Amharic since their students demand it though they had negative perception towards it. This indicates that the teachers are well aware of the principle of teaching which puts the students at the center of the teaching and learning process.

The teachers believe that students have to learn English in English. When they get any difficulty, the teachers have to use various mechanisms such as facial expressions, body language, gesture, and others. But there are some contents which are difficult to explain them using these methods. So, they used Amharic though they do not want to use it. Cook (2001) also revealed that teachers can use L1 when they get difficulty of making clear to their students using various mechanisms. This is, so, one of the factors that make teachers to have varied perception and practice on the use of Amharic in their EFL classes.

The students' experience of learning English which was accompanied with the use of L1 was another driving force that makes them to use Amharic.

It is the students who make the teachers to use Amharic because of their background. They have taught using L1 in their early grades. It is because of that habit that students developed asking question using Amharic [KII, 01].

This shows that the students' background of learning English was supported by the use of Amharic. Due to this, they ask and respond questions when they faced them difficulty to explain their idea using English as using Amharic has fossilized in their mind. In such a way, the teachers forced to allow their students to use Amharic and to use themselves too. Similar to this, Jan, Li, and Lin (2014) suggested that teachers have to use L1 in the EFL classes depending on the students' background. Therefore, learners experience was one of the factors that differs teachers perception and practice with regard to the use of Amharic.

Time also affects teachers to use Amharic in their EFL classroom. Though the teachers were intended to exclusively use English, they tend to use Amharic because of shortage of time. "If the students are confused while explaining using English, you can use other strategies than using Amharic, but using Amharic is the easiest way to save time and to make the students clear" [FGD, 02]. A teacher can use various non-verbal, such as body language, facial expression, and other actions, and verbal such as explaining them using antonym, synonym, context, and other strategies; but they take much time. So, the use of Amharic saves energy and time of the teachers. Cook (2001), Blackman (2014), and Kalanzadeh et al (2013) assured the use of L1 saves time, and it has to be implemented while teaching EFL. Generally, teachers were forced to use Amharic due to shortage of time they had in teaching EFL, and this was found to be one of the affective factors for the teachers to have varied perception and practice on the use of Amharic in their EFL classes.

In a nut shell, some of the external factors that contributed a lot for the teachers to have a varied perception and practice concerning to the use of Amharic in their EFL classes were students' low performance in English, learners' experience of learning, and time. This all are related to the classroom which are external to the teacher. This shows that a teacher has to be flexible depending on the classroom. In other words, he has to use various mechanisms while teaching which bases on his students' background and interest, and based on the real situation in the classroom. This finding aligns with other evidences like Macaro (1997) who suggest that teachers tend to use L1 more than they feel they should due to external factors like students and school related factors which affect teachers' actual use of the L1.

Finally, as the data obtained from the participants indicated, highly experienced teachers (teachers who taught 7 years and above) used Amharic due to exogenous factors whereas less experienced teachers (teachers who taught less than 7 years) used it due to indigenous factors.

Oppositions against the Use of Amharic in the EFL Classes

Some of the participants of this study opposed the use of Amharic in the EFL classes for various reasons. One of the participants said "The teacher who uses Amharic in the EFL classes in our universities has to be taken to court" [FGD, 03]. Their opposition for its usage are presented below.

For one thing, it is a source of conflict. They forwarded that Amharic is not a mother tongue for the majority of the student. And there are many students who cannot communicate using Amharic. In such case, using Amharic is creating bias among the students. "Since the students are heterogeneous and have different ethnicity, you can get ten... twenty... or thirty languages in the class, and if I select Amharic from all these languages, it is bias" [FGD, 03]. So, their

main idea to oppose the use of Amharic is not to create bias among the different ethnicity as Amharic is considered as a language of Amharas (one ethnicity of Ethiopia) and a few of those who come from big cities like Addis Aaba and Diredawa.

Cook (2001) said the use of L1 can be banned if the teacher cannot speak the students L1, or if the students have different L1. In this context, though the students and teachers have different L1, Amharic is the federal state's working language and it is spoken almost in all towns of Ethiopia. All students again learned at least their high school and preparatory school in towns where Amharic is spoken. Besides, Amharic is learned as a subject beginning from grade three at all parts of Ethiopia. So, this idea is somehow different from Cook's idea since all students have a little know how about Amharic though they may have difficulty of communicating.

Their second reason is, using Amharic hinders student exposure to the target language where Ethiopian students have no exposure to it except in the classroom. With regard to this, many researches, for example Cook (2001), Nazary (2008), and Atkins (1987) found L1 as a facilitator of learning EFL. They added that it should not be used excessively. So, a balanced use of Amharic creates an opportunity for learning the target language.

The third reason is that it is against the country's policy. English is a medium of instruction in the Ethiopian higher education institutions. Accordingly, the Ethiopian higher education proclamation states "The medium of instruction in any institution, except possibly in language studies other than the English language, shall be English" (MOE, 2009, p.12). So, using Amharic is working against it. But, this statement neither supports nor forbids the use of Amharic. It is simply about the medium of instruction.

Recommendation

It is recommended that teachers have to use English in their EFL classes. They should have to use various methods rather than Amharic. If they could not communicate with their student using these various strategies, they can use Amharic sometimes. But, this has to be used as a last option and if the following two criteria have fulfilled. The first one is if the need comes from the students, and the last one is if the teacher is sure that all students can listen Amharic. But they should be very careful not to use it excessively. Because a properly managed and planned use of Amharic is a scaffolding for EFL learning and teaching where as an excessive use is dangerous.

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