

**Original Article**

**Translanguaging Practices in Kotebe University of Education Classrooms and their Implications for Pedagogy**

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**Abstract**

Ethiopia uses English as a medium of instruction for every subject, except for national language subjects, at tertiary level education. This policy is also applied at Kotebe University of Education (henceforth KUE). The education of bilingual and multilingual speakers is facing several challenges due to the medium of instruction. One of the problems is the prevalence of monolingual instructional approach whereby instructions are carried out exclusively in English, and the place given to L1 use in any circumstances is less. This project attempts to explore the practice of translanguaging (multilinguals' tendency to switch between languages) among students and teachers in KUE classes. By employing a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, data about the nature, types and functions of local language use in classrooms were gathered. Combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods were implemented to analyze the data. The results indicated that local languages were used in classrooms for various purposes by students and teachers. Most of the students had positive attitudes towards the use of local languages. Teachers also confirmed that they used code-switching, code-mixing, and translation, in classrooms to meet their students' communication needs.

Key words: Local languages, Translanguaging, Code-switching, Translation, Attitudes

**1. Introduction**

The way people perceive the entity 'language' has changed over time after the outlook of early linguists, like Ferdinand De Saussure, and Noam Chomsky. Both of these linguists posited that language is free from its users and its context (Garcia & Wei 2014:7). Linguists have made progress in their assumption of language and its context through time as the social world of language gets complicated with other factors, such as migration, technology, trade, etc. With these experiences prevailing in speakers, it has been acknowledged that language is not free of context

of use. It exists within the context of language use and should be dealt with as such. As Garcia and Wei (2014:9) put it, “With the rise of post-structuralism in the post-modern era, language has begun to be conceptualized as a series of social practices and actions by speakers that are embedded in a web of social and cognitive relations.” Among these recently acknowledged social practices and actions is translanguaging or using L1 in L2 medium of communication.

Translanguaging, a phenomenon related with multilingual speakers, means swinging between languages during communication. It is the flexibility of speakers to choose among the languages they speak to meet their communicative needs (Garcia & Wei 2014:8). The rise of multilingualism has drawn the attention of language researchers and instructors to various phenomena that have been observed in multilingual speakers, who develop knowledge on how and when to use their languages depending on, for instance, the interlocutors involved in the conversation, the topic of the conversation, and the social context (Reyes, 2004). The tendency of multilingual students, to choose between their repertoires in language use has also attracted the attention of language researchers.

At earlier times, there was an overwhelming assumption that considers both translanguaging and code-switching as signs of students’ and teachers’ inefficiencies in the target languages of classrooms. However, as Beres (2015:107) notes the positive use of translanguaging in Wales with teaching in two languages namely Welsh and English as, “Through the systematic use of both languages in the same lesson, translanguaging enables students to internalize new knowledge, process it and then makes sense of it in the other language.”

The pedagogical functions of translanguaging have been acknowledged by others like Crees & Blackledge (2015: 26) who write, “In the classroom, translanguaging approaches draw on all the linguistic resources of the learner to maximize understanding and achievement. Thus, both or all languages are used in a dynamic and functionally integrated manner to organize and mediate understanding, speaking, literacy and learning.” Though translanguaging has emerged as a pedagogical theory, in recent years, researchers also contended that it is not only a classroom practice, it is also a language practice of individuals trying to meet their complex communicative needs (Garcia & Wei 2014:126). This study is thus set out to explore the ways in which students

and teachers communicate in a classroom where only one language (English) is ascribed as a medium of instruction, by taking KUE as a case in focus.

Ethiopia is a multilingual, multiethnic and culturally pluralistic country. According to *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), there are eighty-five living languages spoken, divided among four different language families: the Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic families of the Afro-asiatic phylum and those belonging to the Nilo-saharan phyla. Amharic is used as a lingua franca in Ethiopia and this practice is encouraged by a range of opportunities, including its function as a working language of the federal government, trade, urbanization, labor migration, displacement, education and literacy and most importantly by intermarriages. Though regional languages have been introduced for wider communications, Amharic continues to spread, both as a first language and as a second language (Cohen, 2006: 171).

As to Berhanu (2009), the current education policy, which has been in place since 1994, accords high practical status to the mother tongue as medium of instruction, particularly at the primary level, with transition to English at grades 5, 7, or 9 depending upon the region; and the learning of Amharic as a subject by speakers of languages other than Amharic. The policy for most students, therefore, is trilingual (multilingual) based on the mother tongue, Amharic and English. From grade nine onwards English is the sole official medium of instruction in Ethiopia (cf. Ministry of Education, Education and Training Policy, 1994, revised in 2023).

While multilingualism can be observed in different settings, it has more obvious social consequences in educational contexts (García & Lewi 2014). Language instruction currently faces several challenges in the education of bilinguals and multilinguals. That is, the use of the monolingual speaker of English as the model of proficiency (something which English language learners should strive to meet) is one of the predominant concerns. More specifically, in English as a Foreign Language programs (EFL) teachers and students work under the belief that an L2-only classroom policy maximizes language learning opportunities (Skutnabb-Kangas 2009). However, Inbar-Lourie (2010:351-367) notes that language teaching pedagogy has tended to ignore or even suppress bilingual or multilingual options endorsing a predominantly monolingual policy, one which equates ‘good teaching’ with exclusive or nearly exclusive target language use.

This study explores the views as well as the linguistic behaviors of students and instructors about the use of local languages in English only medium of instruction classrooms where the majority of the students are bi/multilinguals. Its objectives are to- identify the linguistic strategies that instructors employ to present content and /or form in classroom, investigate students' and teachers' practices and the associated functions of L1 use, assess the views of students and teachers about the use of L1 in classrooms). We believe that the findings of the study contribute to reconsider the current teaching learning of both English and content subjects. It will also add to our knowledge of the theories of second language acquisition/learning.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Sampling design, sample size and methods**

Informants of this study were both students and instructors who were learning and teaching respectively at KUE in 2017/18 academic year. Using random sampling technique, 150 second year students of the six colleges were selected to fill in a survey questionnaire. The colleges include Natural & Computational Sciences, Social Sciences, Languages & Humanities, Teacher Education, Urban Development as well as Business and Economics.

Besides, using convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007), 10 instructors were selected for a semi-structured interview, for they possess some key characteristics that are pertinent to the purpose of the investigation. The selected instructors taught English and content subjects in different disciplines. Their experiences in teaching at university level ranged from 3 to 32 years whereby the average being 12.1 years. While two of the instructors had PhDs, the rest (eight instructors) were MA holders in different disciplines. All of the participants were promised anonymity and the interview which took 20-30 minutes for an instructor was conducted in English (see Appendix B for the interview questions).

### **2.2. Methods of data analysis**

A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed to analyze the data gathered through interview and a questionnaire. The data gathered through the questionnaire were analyzed with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The data were reported using descriptive statistics.

The transcripts of the interviews were first cleaned up before the data analysis began. This initial stage cleaned-up the transcripts for any dross, material that occurred in transcripts which did not directly relate to the topic or repetitious or peripheral. Then, the data were categorized into meaning units based on the specific codes and the recurring themes in the transcripts, which later were used as units of analysis. Thereafter, a thematic analysis procedure was operated on the processed data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke 2006: 6). This approach offers a systematic method of grouping textual data by breaking the text down into meaningful units, developing a category system and grouping together ideas of a similar sort. The themes were identified at two levels: semantic and latent. In addition to describing what is in the texts (semantic level), the analysis goes beyond the semantic content of the data and examines the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that shape and inform the semantic content of the data (latent level). Moreover, the data were approached in an inductive or ‘bottom-up’ way, that is, the majority of the themes identified were strongly linked to the data though there were some influences from the theoretical and epistemological commitments (Braun & Clarke 2006: 12).

### 3. Results and discussion

This section of the paper presents the data collected through a questionnaire from students and from interviews with teachers. The results of the questionnaire are compiled in tables followed by analysis and interpretation of the descriptive data. The interview data from teachers are discussed separately from that of the data from students. The section contains contents that relate to respondents’ background, their ideas about mother tongue use in classrooms and frequency of mother tongue use by teachers as reported by students. It also provides the data from the sampled instructors and the discussions.

#### 3.1. Respondents' background

Background of the respondents to the questionnaire is shown in the coming three tables.

**Table 1: Sex of respondents**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>no.</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	69	46
Male	81	54
Total	150	100

As can be noted from Table 1, 69 (46%) female and 81 (54%) male students filled in the questionnaire. The data indicate that both female and male students were nearly equally represented in the research.

**Table 2: Respondents' mother tongue**

	Amhari c	Orom o	Tigrign a	Wolait a	Hadiy a	Ged o	Sidam a	Gurag e	Kembat a	Basket o	Tota l
no	68	46	13	9	4	1	3	4	1	1	150
%	45.4	30.7	8.7	6	2.7	.7	2	2.7	.7	.7	100

Table 2 shows that student respondents had different linguistic backgrounds. The majority were Amharic (68 or 46%) and Oromo (46 or 30.7%) language speakers. There were also Tigrigna (13 or 8.7%), Wolaita (9 or 6%), Hadiya (4 or 2.7%), Gurage (4 or 2.7%) and Sidama (3 or 2%) mother tongue speakers. Gedo, Kembata and Basketo were also each spoken by one respondent as mother tongues. Generally, it can be said that multilingual speakers were involved in the questionnaire. Inclusion of respondents from different linguistic background will give the opportunity to get diversified ideas and attitudes towards use of mother tongues in classrooms.

### 3.2. Students' ideas towards the use of mother tongues in classrooms

Student respondents were asked to give their opinion about the use of local languages in the classrooms. Their responses are compiled in the coming table.

**Table 3: Students' ideas on the use of mother tongues for different functions in the classrooms**

Mother tongues can be used in classroom to:		SA <sup>1</sup>	A	U	D	SD	total
explain difficult concepts	no.	25	62	11	31	21	150
	%	16.7	41.3	7.3	20.7	14	100
understand and describe new vocabulary	no.	38	68	3	32	9	150
	%	25.3	45.3	2	21.3	6	100
Facilitate group works	no.	35	70	5	27	13	150
	%	23.3	46.7	3.3	18	8.7	100

As can be noted in from Table 3, many students (16.7% strongly agree, 41.3% agree) believed that local languages other than English could be used to explain some concepts which might appear difficult to the learners in the classroom. To this, 20.7% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed.

<sup>1</sup>SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, U= Undecided, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

What can be said from the data is that though the majority supported the use of local languages to explain difficult concepts, still more than a quarter of them did not like the idea of mixing local languages to classroom language use. The reason for these groups of students to stand against use of local languages in English as a medium of instruction classrooms could be their tendency to have different linguistic backgrounds. A mother tongue to one student many not be the same for the other.

The majority of the respondents (25.3% strongly agree, 45.3%) considered that local languages can be used to illustrate new vocabulary or to learn them. A quarter of them (21.3% disagree, 6% strongly disagree) disagreed that mother tongues should be used to learn new vocabulary. The rest, 8.7% could not decide.

The other concept that students were asked in the questionnaire was whether local languages should be used during group works. It was the majorities' consent (23.3% strongly agree, 46.7% agree) that local languages should be used to facilitate group activities. Some of them (18.7% disagree, 8% strongly disagree) did not support that mother tongues should be used during group works. We can understand from the data that most of the students wanted to have the chance to use mother tongues to facilitate group activities in the classrooms. Respondents were also asked to indicate for what purposes they shifted from English to local languages in the classrooms. The results are presented in the following table.

**Table 4: Areas mother tongues were used by students themselves**

I use mother tongue to:		SA	A	U	D	SD	total
Draft assignments and translate it into English	No.	43	51	6	32	18	150
	%	28.7	34	4	21	12	100
Interpret English lectures into mother tongue	No.	43	53	7	26	21	150
	%	28.7	35.3	4.7	17.3	14	100
take lecture notes	No.	48	46	8	29	19	150
	%	32	30.7	5.3	19.3	12.7	100
share problems with teachers	No.	48	65	3	18	16	150
	%	32	43.3	2	12	10.7	100

Student respondents stated some activities which they preferred mother tongues over English to communicate in the classroom. More than half of them (28.7% strongly agree, 34% agree) said that they used mother tongue to prepare their assignments. Again more than a quarter of them (21%disagree, 12% strongly disagree) did not like the idea of preparing assignments in mother

tongue and translating them into English. Given the fact that reading materials are presented in foreign languages or English in the University's libraries, the tendency to use mother tongues to do assignments of any subject of study might not be fulfilled.

The respondents also reported that they (28.7% strongly agree, 35.3% agree) interpreted lectures into their own language. That means they tried to find equivalents of English terms in their own language when they followed up lectures. Some of them did not look for mother tongue equivalents of terms they listen in English lectures. With regard to learning in English, it is a known fact that translation of ideas into mother tongue is one of the strategies of students' learning. Therefore, students of KUE also exploited this technique in their endeavor to better understand English lectures.

The other area students applied mother tongue was taking lecture notes. To this, 32.7% and 30% put that they jotted down lectures in their mother tongue. We can assume two occasions that may lead students to take notes in their mother tongue. On the one hand, their tendency to interpret lectures into mother tongue (as reported in the above item) might enable them to put ideas in it. On the other hand, supposedly, teachers used mother tongues in classrooms and so students recorded the lectures explained in it.

Students also pointed out that they used local languages to share their issues to their teachers. With regards to this, the majority (32% strongly agree, 43.3% agree) indicated that they used mother tongues or other Ethiopian languages to speak their problems to their teachers. Very few of them (12 % disagree, 7% strongly disagree), did not agree with the idea of using local languages to talk to their teachers. Based on our experience, we can say that students feel very relaxed when using local languages than English with their teachers, especially outside classrooms. In the classrooms they mostly try to use English even to talk personal issues since they might consider classrooms to be formal settings and the medium of instruction should be used. According to Escobar and Dillard-Paltrineri (2015), multilingual students apply both languages in or outside classrooms. But at times when they know they are expected to demonstrate second language use, they may strive to meet that expectation especially in the classrooms.



The data generally show that local languages were used in classrooms to carry out different activities. This implies that students as bilingual speakers of English and their own mother tongue used both languages to benefit most out of their lessons.

### 3.3. Students' views towards use of local languages in classrooms

The other issue that the research tried to investigate was students' views towards the use of local languages in the classrooms. Their responses are compiled in the next table followed by a discussion.

**Table 5: Views towards use of mother tongues in classrooms**

Please express your views towards local languages use		SA	A	U	D	SD	total
I feel confident	No.	45	66	4	28	7	150
	%	30	44	2.7	18.7	4.7	100
I want teachers to use local languages to praise me	No.	46	66	10	16	12	150
	%	30.7	44	6.7	10.7	10	100
I understand teachers' questions in mother tongue	No.	45	63	11	13	18	150
	%	30	42	7.3	8.7	12	100
I understand explanations in mother tongue better	No.	49	55	9	22	15	150
	%	32.7	36.7	6	14.7	10	100

As can be seen from Table 5, the majority of the students agreed (30% strongly agree, 44% agree) that they felt confident when they used mother tongues in the classrooms. Few students (18.7% strongly disagree, 4.7% disagree) with the idea that use of mother tongue gave confidence. Many linguists agree that linguistic freedom and psychological freedom are related. In other ways, speakers have more mental freedom and confidence when they use the language they now better than otherwise (Orman, 2008). It is therefore acceptable that use of mother tongue boosts students' confidence.

The student respondents (30.7% strongly agree, 44% agree) also mentioned that they were happy when teachers used mother tongues to praise them. Some of them (10.7% disagree, 10% disagree) did not agree that the use of mother tongues to praise them was pleasant. Though we know from our everyday teaching experience that teachers mostly used English than mother tongues to praise their students' performance, use of local languages for the same purpose was also welcomed from the students' side.

Use of mother tongues to ask classroom oral questions was also rated positively by the respondents. The majority of them (30% strongly agree, 42% agree) considered that teachers' questions addressed in mother tongues were easy to understand. Few of them (8% disagree, 12% strongly disagree) disagreed that classroom questions were more understandable in mother tongue than in English.

Teachers' explanations delivered in mother tongues were also seen to be easily understandable. To this item, most of the respondents (32.7% strongly agree, 36.7% agree) agreed that classroom explanations provided in mother tongues were simple to recognize. Nearly a quarter of them (10% disagree, 14% strongly disagree) did not agree that use of mother tongues had positive impact on understanding classroom explanations. It is a clear fact that topics discussed in local languages are simpler to comprehend than ones in English. Garcia (2009) also acknowledges that mother tongue use gives students the opportunity to understand lessons better.

All in all, the data in the table indicate that the majority of the students had positive view towards the use of mother tongues in the classroom. They considered use of mother tongues to be helpful for their academic success alongside medium of instructions in University classes.

### **3.4. Analysis of teachers' interviews**

This section of the research deals with what the teachers in KUE perceived about the use of learners' primary languages in classrooms for teaching both content and language (English) courses. It also assesses their perceived linguistic practices in classrooms where education is supposed to be mediated only through English. Based on the analysis of the transcripts, a range of broad categories along with some specific themes have been identified. What follows is a discussion of these themes using relevant examples from the excerpts.

### **3.5. Using learners' L1 in classroom**

Though use of learners' L1 in a foreign language classroom is a debatable issue among language scholars, the overwhelming majority of the participants confirmed that they used learners' L1 in classrooms to teach both content and language (English) courses. The respondents, however, differed in terms of the purpose and the extent to which they allowed the involvement of learners' primary languages in classrooms. The major reason for the inclusion of learners' L1 in classes was the need to remedy miscomprehension. In order to deal with learners' misunderstanding,

instructors reported the use of a range of strategies that involved the students' L1. These included translating and code-switching for the purposes of exemplifying as well as summarizing difficult concepts and forms, among others.

### ***3.5.1. To remedy miscomprehension***

Miscomprehension may occur due to different factors such as complexity of the topic, the instructor's way of presentation, having low proficiency level in MoI, and so on. Proficiency in the language of instruction can affect comprehension of content and hence the performance of students in various subjects. In such times, instructors usually use a wide ranging mechanism to effectively deal with this problem. As many of the respondents reported, they used learners' L1 when the students failed to comprehend an issue being discussed in the classroom. The instructors employed the following specific techniques or mechanisms to deal with students' problems of comprehension.

### ***3.5.2. A combination of mother tongue and other methods***

Some participants said that they made use of a variety of pedagogical tools to clarify topics and to avoid a comprehension problem from the part of the learners. These included presenting the subject matter in simpler language, retelling the main points, providing additional examples, scaffolding, etc. In the following excerpt, using mother tongue is considered as part of the pedagogical strategies that respondent (P01) used to remedy misunderstanding in the class.

1<sup>st</sup> I try to explain it [the issue] in simple statements. 2<sup>nd</sup> I use teaching aids if the topic allows me to do. So 3<sup>rd</sup>, I try to briefly explain with vernacular languages. 4<sup>th</sup> I let them to read different materials from library. 5<sup>th</sup> I use different examples/much related with the topic

The excerpt shows that participant (P01) had the experience of briefly explaining the subject matter using languages commonly used by the learners when they become unsuccessful in their effort to understand it. Though there was a utilization of learners' primary languages, the use was limited (only for a specific purpose), to providing a brief explanation about the topic.

Similarly, two respondents conceded that they used Amharic and a simplified version of their English when there was a need to ensure comprehension. Participant (P03) in particular reported, “When I found out that my students do not understand the content I teach... (1) I try to explain in simple English, (2) I use Amharic for difficult words, phrases, ideas.” This indicates that when a simplified version of the instructor’s English fails to fix the learners’ misunderstanding, a local language (Amharic) is used for that purpose. This was achieved, especially by using Amharic equivalents for the difficult English terminologies and associated concepts.

### ***3.5.3. Employing code-switching***

Code-switching is a systematic alternative use of two languages or language varieties within a single conversation or utterance and a main feature of bilinguals' speech (Li 2000). Here, the term code refers to either a certain dialect like the dialects of Amharic or English, or to a certain language, such as Amharic or English (Zelalem 1998). Code-switching is extensively used in classrooms for various functions, such as to fix comprehension problems, to get feedback from learners, etc.

When asked about the strategy used when learners misunderstood content or form, respondent (P09) said, “I would be forced to use code-switching.” In the demographic data, participant (P09) declared to be a bilingual in Amharic and English. Hence, when the students fail to understand his English, this instructor immediately switches to Amharic and then back to English. That means, English is regularly used to deliver a lecture on a certain topic (or issue) and when the learners do not understand it, the instructor is forced to use Amharic. By using Amharic, this respondent (P09) clarifies unclear points or issues in the process of learning-teaching English.

### ***3.5.4. To summarize a lecture***

One instructor reported that he used Amharic in classroom, but as a last resort to help learners understand the subject matter. Specifically, in the words of this participant (P03), “As far as I can [,] I use English as a medium of instruction using simple words/phrases/sentences. Sometimes, when I found my students did not understand the content I use Amharic as a way of summarizing the lesson.” Again, learners’ L1s are not the primary options to deal with the problem of understanding in the classroom. As it is shown in the excerpt above, Amharic is introduced to the

class discussion only after the other options (paraphrasing, simplifying, etc) have been exhaustively used. Thereafter, as a last resort, Amharic (a local language) is used to give the summary of the discussion made entirely in English. Basically, a summary of a lecture contains only essential ideas and important details, leaving irrelevant points out. In so doing, a summary provides learners with the areas that are worth noting and remembering and thus it serves as an important pedagogical tool to facilitate and to improve learning. This is done, as it has been outlined above by using a local language, Amharic.

### **3.5.5. To get feedback from students**

Another purpose of resorting to learners' L1 in English class is to obtain feedback from students on lessons, activities or instructions. According to respondent (P10), a local language is used in the classroom to identify learners' problems during class discussions. The following excerpt shows the procedures this instructor follows to identify the learners' problems and takes solution in class.

*When I found out that my students do not understand the content I teach, I first identify the reason why they do not understand the content. I would ask individual students to tell me what they think is the reason not to understand the content. In doing so, I use the local language (P10).*

The excerpt presented above indicates that a local language is employed as a tool in learning-teaching process. That is, it is used in the process of getting feedback as to what the cause(s) of the learners' failure in understanding the message or what went wrong in the presentation of content. This procedure is significant because the instructor cannot remedy the problem if he/she does not know the factors that caused it. Again, a local language served as an important tool to extract this significant piece of information from the learners.

Both the language policy and the methodology of teaching oblige the instructors to use English only in the classroom. However, they employed an array of strategies (mainly code-switching and translation) that incorporate local languages in the classroom discussions. Code-switching and translation are processes that show bilingual students perform bilingually in meaning-making, cognitive engagement, creativity and criticality (García & Wei, 2014). Though code-switching is rarely endorsed institutionally or pedagogically underpinned, when it is used, it becomes a

pragmatic response to the local classroom context (Creese & Blackledge, 2010), and it was found out that code-switching between L1 and L2 by both teachers and learners in the second language classrooms could facilitate the process of second language learning (Nichols & Colon, 2000). Code switching techniques, for instance, can be an extremely useful way of employing the students' L1 to emphasize important concepts in the classroom (Cook, 2001).

On the other hand, a couple of instructors argued that L1 should not be used in any form in the classroom where English is the medium of education. They think that maximum exposure has to be given to the L2 (English), and using L1 is considered as detracting from learning English. Therefore, these instructors do not use learners' L1; they rather employ strategies pertinent to the English language to deal with problems associated with comprehension as shown below.

### ***3.6. Rephrasing and using apt examples (English)***

To deal with the learners' miscomprehension, strategies abound to L2 such as rephrasing, exemplification, etc. were used instead of learners' L1. Consider this excerpt which emphasizes an exclusive use of English: "When I feel like my students are not clear with my instructions, I usually rephrase things and approach them the way they can easily understand. Besides, I try to support my point of discussion with examples." (P07). Here, there is no room to accommodate the learners' mother tongues in the classroom, and this practice seems to be based on the assumption that language has to be taught better without reference to L1, which is believed to lead to errors (interference errors). Besides, teaching entirely through the TL makes the language real. Escobar and Dillard-Paltrineri (2015), however, maintained that the belief that using learners' L1 is the result of semi-bilingualism and has led students to believe that such use is detrimental to their learning of L2; it has also led teachers to realize restrictive L2-only policies which detract learners from using L1.

### **3.7. Views on the English-only language policy**

In Ethiopian Higher Institutions (EHIs), English serves as the sole medium of instruction. Regarding to the use of language(s) for medium of instruction in effective university classes, the majority of the participants endorsed the English-only language policy as a viable medium of instruction in EHIs. Participants also considered the English language as an effective means of ensuring learning at a higher level. They, however, claimed that certain problems pertinent to

learners' proficiency and the difficulty nature of some contents forced them to use local languages for classes that have to be exclusively conducted in English. What follows is a presentation of some of the contexts, which according to the respondents, require or demand the involvement of the learners' primary languages in an English-only medium of instruction.

### **3.8. Certain contents better understood in L1**

Participant (P03) in the quote given below stressed that local languages have to be used to provide examples to support learners understand the content discussed in the classroom. Such an intervention (exemplification through local languages) is employed to make some contents comprehensible to the students. The underlying reason seems to be that some contents are unintelligible for the students.

*It should be an obligation to use English only [as a medium of instruction] as there are times that students will face very difficult time to understand some contents in English. In such a case the teacher need to use some examples in local language Amharic and lead some other students to think some examples in their own language. But conducting classes in both English and other local languages seems not to be effective (P03).*

This belief is based on Vygotsky's most important claim, that is, language is not only a communication device but also a powerful tool that mediates cognition (Vygotsky 1981). When learners engage in complex and cognitively demanding L2 tasks or issues, L1 helps them to better understand and leads to improved learning. In helping the learners contextualize the content and hence comprehend it, the participant does not show preference only for Amharic, but also encouraged other students to apply their own respective languages for similar cases and purposes. In their study, Swain and Lapkin (2000) pointed out that L1 can be an important cognitive tool in carrying out tasks that are both linguistically and cognitively complex.

#### **3.8.1. To discuss an account of local events**

Using learners' L1s can be beneficial, especially in expressing local issues. One prominent case reported is the use of idiomatic expressions in learners' L1 to make clear local events. The quote presented below illustrates this purpose:

...if for example I am teaching modern Ethiopian history about “the reign of Queen Zewditu” and the controversy about her death, I prefer to tell them some Amharic versions like  
 “ድሮም አጼ ሚኒልክ ድመት ነበር ጠላታቸው ንግስት ዘውዲቱንም አነር ገደላቸው” for the Amharic speakers it is very easy to understand the causes of the death of the queen (P01).

This excerpt is particularly interesting as it exemplifies the importance of using local languages in expressing an account of a local story. While teaching about the death of the then queen Zewditu, the instructor employed an idiomatic expression in Amharic that signals the cause of her death and/or possibly who might be the queen’s killer. The idiomatic expression goes like this:

<i>dīromm</i>	<i>as’e</i>	<i>menelik</i>	<i>dimmət</i>	<i>nəbbər</i>	<i>t’alataččəw</i>
formerly	emperor	Menelik	cat	was	his enemy
<i>nīgist</i>	<i>zewditu-n-mm</i>	<i>anər</i>	<i>gəddalaččəw</i>		
empress and of Zewditu	panther	killed her			

‘It was a cat that was the enemy of emperor Menelik II, and hence a panther killed empress Zewditu.’

This idiomatic expression implicitly relates the death of queen Zewditu with the enemy of her father, Menelik II (who died earlier). It specifically connects the causes of her death by ascribing *dimmət* ‘cat’ as the enemy of Menelik II and thus speculating that, it is *anər* ‘a panther’ that killed queen Zewditu, Menelik II’s daughter. That is, as *dimmət* ‘cat’ and *anər* ‘a panther’ belong to the same family (called cat family), the killer of empress Zewditu was a descendant of her father’s enemy. Such aspects of learning could be enhanced by use of the L1 such as Amharic. The ability to capitalize such linguistic skills and knowledge already accumulated via the mother tongue is among habits of good language learners (Butzkamm 2000).

### 3.8.2. Proficiency gap in learners

Learners’ level of proficiency in English has also influenced instructors to resort to local languages. Some respondents advocate the use of English as a MoI, but they think that the learners’ proficiency in English is so low that it is impossible to fully realize it in the classroom for teaching-learning. Participant (P05), for instance, admitted that the use of learners’ mother languages in classroom is the corollary of the low proficiency level of the students’ English. This participant also asserted that: “As to me since the medium of instruction is English, teachers should lecture



by using English but the level of students' English is low, we teachers will be forced to translate into their local language". Here, translation is used as a tool held by teachers to bridge the students English proficiency gap in classes that are supposed to be conducted exclusively in English. The learners' level of comprehension of the language of instruction can negatively affect performance because students may experience difficulties in grasping the underlying basic concepts that are taught in various subjects (Nyika 2015).

### **3.9. Students' use of local languages in classroom**

All of the lecturers interviewed reported that students make use of local languages in classroom though the language policy stipulates English is the only MoI. The learners use their local languages in certain contexts for certain purposes. The following are the contexts and associated functions in which learners use their L1 in classrooms, as reported by the participants.

- i. When they want to ask and answer questions
- ii. When they need clarifications or explanations
- iii. When they try to express complex ideas
- iv. When they discuss with their peers

With regard to this, participant (P04) stressed that lecturers cannot fully apply the English-only language policy in the classroom, for the learners are not a full-fledged user of the English language. Hence, we should continue using the learners' primary languages for certain functions (asking questions and providing explanations) until they become fluent enough in English. Here, it should be considered that asking questions and requesting for clarification are important components of cognition, and the students depend on local languages to achieve these goals.

The use of learners' L1 is not restricted to content subjects only. In English classes too, students use local languages. Again, local languages are used in this context when the learners need to understand things. This includes when they want to work on assignments and when they want to get explanation about instructions from the teacher. As to participant (P10), "They [students] prefer to use local languages when they have a need to understand things. For example, they use local languages when they are given assignments. They also like their teacher to use a local language when he/she gives instructions."

### **3.10. Combining languages in and outside classroom**

With regard to the relevance and appropriateness of combining languages in and outside classrooms, the respondents demonstrated two views: combining languages outside a classroom is acceptable but it is inappropriate in a class.

### ***3.10.1. L1 should not be combined with L2 in class***

Generally, there seems to be an agreement among the majority of the interviewed lecturers that English only has to be used in classroom, but outside the classroom it is possible to combine languages. This might have emanated from the belief that the communication that takes place in classroom is different from the one that happens outside the classroom. On this basis, they described academic language (communication) for the former and social or interactional for the latter. This view is reflected in participant (P05) who asserted, “Since academic issues need strict language usage, we teachers use a single language only. On social issues mixing two or more languages may not be a problem.” That is, using L1 either in the forms of mixing or switching with L2 (English) is not acceptable in academic contexts. Conversely, in communication forms that occur outside classrooms (as in market places, church, pub, etc), mixing two or more languages does not pose any problem and it is rather a normal as well as an effective means of communication.

The formal communication, which is associated with teaching-learning in the classroom, has to be free from interference. This is because interference is believed to be a sign of deficiency. On the other hand, the purpose of informal communication is mainly to socialize and hence the interlocutors can do this either by mixing, translating or switching between codes. This view creates a disconnect between ‘what happens out there in real world’ and ‘what should happen’ in the L2 classroom (Escobar & Elizabeth 2015). Another point that participant (P03) made against combining English and a local language during discussion in classroom is that the practice consumes the time allotted for teaching the course.

The assumption that bi/multilingualism is a double monolingualism may have created the belief that for bi/multilingualism speakers, each language works as an entirely separate system. But translanguaging and theories of bilingualism disproved the disconnected role each language is believed to play (Escobar & Elizabeth 2015). Additionally, this double monolingualism approach to learning-teaching of L2 has spread almost all over the world, causing L1 to be pitted against L2,

a practice that contradicts the sociolinguistic reality of students who naturally language bilingually in and outside of the classroom (Escobar & Elizabeth 2015). Much current research assumes the two languages are inextricably bound up with each other when we speak a second language, the first language is not turned off (Cook 2001: 17).

### ***3.10.2. Classrooms better places for L2 (English)***

A further idea that these respondents put forward for refusing the use of two languages in classroom is that in EFL context the classroom is the only place where students can practice English. Accordingly, it has to be exploited extensively for practicing and using the target language only. Consider the view of participant (P07) in the excerpt that follows: “In the first place, I stick on English language use in the classrooms for the medium of instruction demands it to be so. May be another reason can be: classrooms are better places to exercise the language.” In this perspective, by using English and only English in the classroom it would be possible to observe the language policy and to provide students with the context to practice the target language. In so doing, better learning outcomes will be obtained. Generally, it implies that the use of L1 in EFL contexts hinders the provision of enough comprehensible input which is believed to be a prerequisite for language acquisition (Krashen 1985). However, exposure alone cannot guarantee proficiency (accuracy and fluency in using the TL). Besides, though the idea is laudable, however, there is no empirical basis that can back up the supposition that exclusive TL use correlates with improved learning gains (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Macaro, 2001; Turnbull, 2001; Auerbach, 1993) or the quantity of teacher L2 input may not be as beneficial as the quality of L2 input (Dickson 1992).

### ***3.10.3. Good to combine English and a local language***

One view which is divergent from the rest comes from participant (P04) who stated that it is okay to combine English and another language both in and outside the classroom. This outlook among other things does not put a significant difference between communications taking place in and outside classroom. Leaving other things aside, both contexts are considered as forms communication. Communicating ideas by moving back and forth between languages is a normal way of life, and there is no reason not to apply this strategy in classroom for teaching and learning purpose, which is one form of communication systems. Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain (2009) claimed that selective and principled code-switching in L2 learning classroom contexts should be seen as a reflection of bilingual and multilingual speakers’ practices in everyday life. It was also

found out that when the classroom is conceptualized as a bilingual space by both students and teacher, code-switching patterns, for instance, emerge in the learners that are similar to those found in non-classroom data (Liebscher & Jennifer 2005).

### **3.11. Translating practice in English classroom**

Participants valued the act of translating a text from English to a local language or vice versa differently. Many considered the practice as good for teaching-learning both language and content; others viewed it as a bad practice. Still few participants suggested a cautious use of translating in an L2 (English) classroom. A range of specific reasons has been presented to support and substantiate each of these claims.

#### ***3.11.1. Translation as a good practice***

Overall, many participants viewed the act of translating a text from English to a local language or vice versa as a good practice, for the process improves the learners' proficiency in using the two languages. The major objective of learning is developing the ability to understand things given in class and equipping oneself with the necessary skills to extract and use local knowledge. Accordingly, participant (P02) admitted that translating is a good classroom practice as it helps to uncover indigenous knowledge and to make other communities know about it and use it. Besides, the practice of translating improves learners' competence in using the two languages. Translating practice aids students to know the systems of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). On this point, participant (P01) added that translating is a good practice since it helps learners know the structure of the two languages in terms of orthography/phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics and thus improves L2 learning. Additionally, this practice raises learners' awareness of the similarities and differences between their first language and the target language and this is a useful way of accessing the students' schema, and alert them to potential challenges the new language may present them with (Meyer 2008).

#### ***3.11.2. Translation has to be minimized***

Other participants recommended that the translating practice which takes place in an L2 classroom has to be minimal. Consider the excerpt given below:

*Translating a text from local languages to English and vice versa is sometimes good [emphasis ours] because it can give some hint to the teacher on how much they are*

*understanding what is being said and written. But students should learn to explain what they understand using simple English and expose themselves to the literatures without translating into the local languages (P01).*

The above excerpt illustrates that the instructor employs translating from English to the learners' local languages and vice versa so as to make sure whether the students have understood the content (in both writing and speaking) or not. And this is especially interesting because an important component of effective learning-teaching, that is, getting feedback from learners, is served by using local languages through translating, not by the target language, which is supposed to serve the entire learning-teaching taking place in university classes.

### ***3.11.3. Translating as a bad practice***

There are also some participants who considered translating as a bad practice. They think that the act of translating makes the teaching-learning of English ineffective. Besides, the practice overburdens learners with additional, unnecessary tasks as the following excerpt demonstrates: “[Making students translate a text from local languages to English or vice versa] tends to be bad practice. Because it does not facilitate their learning of English language; rather it is addition of tasks which is not related to the lesson or the content.” (P07). Translating practice affects negatively the learning-teaching of English by interfering L1 with English and by consuming the time allotted for teaching and practicing the English language. In connection with the ineffectiveness of translating, another respondent, (P05) stressed that using English in classrooms is the only way to have an effective class and therefore translating has to be avoided. This argument seems to be based on the widely held belief about how L2 should be taught and learnt. That is, instruction has to be carried out exclusively in English and this is done without making any reference to L1. The process of translation from L1 into L2 or vice versa hinders the acquisition of L2 (English).

Moreover, it was reported that translating has to be avoided in an L2 (English) classroom, for it disagrees with the basic tenets of the communicative approach, which is a dominant approach in teaching L2. Respondent (P09) viewed translating as a good method only for developing learners' writing and reading skills. However, in the eyes of the communicative approach to language teaching and learning, translating is not acceptable since it does not help learners develop their

communicative skills as this method focuses on interaction in the ‘target’ language. Another point is that the communicative approach does not allow the involvement of L1 in the teaching and learning of L2 (English). That is to say, translation encourages learners to use L1 while the communicative approach tries to remove it from L2 class.

Translation can be regarded as a communicative activity since it involves communication between the teacher and the student. Learners are encouraged to discuss rights and wrongs as well as problems related to the translation task (Leonardi 2009). Though it is obvious that translating improves the writing and reading skills of learners, it can also develop speaking and listening skills. When students involve in a conversation on a translation topic, this helps them enhance their speaking skills. Similarly, when students are requested to talk to both the teacher and other learners, and respond to these parties, the process gives them the chance to improve their listening and speaking skills.

Furthermore, the respondents maintained that translating is appropriate only for training translators; therefore, it has to be avoided from an English classroom. As to participant (P07), “In translation classes, it could be ideal to use native languages along with the target language. Otherwise, I don’t think it is a good idea to use languages other than English in classrooms for this may share their time to exercise English.” The point is that English has to be taught exclusively in English and other languages such as learners’ primary languages are unnecessary, for they are believed to negatively influence the learning of the target language. Such a practice even forces learners to share their precious L2 use time with the L1. However, in certain contexts translating is a more efficient means of presenting the meanings of vocabulary items or an explanation of a grammar point (Macaro 2001; Butzkamm 2009). As a result, the need to clarify meaning through translation has been shown not only in saving time but also in facilitating L2 learning by maximizing L2 input. Moreover, Laufer & Shmueli (1997) showed that L1 translation is the most effective method for learning the meanings of L2 words compared to the other different methods.

### **3.12. Encouragement to use L1**

Almost all of the participants maintained that they do not overtly encourage their students to use local languages in classroom. The instructors instead reported that they encourage their students to use English exclusively in the classroom. The respondents vary as to why they discourage their

students from using L1 in the classroom and encourage only the use of L2 (English). Some of their reasons together with illustrative cases extracted from the transcripts have been presented below.

### ***3.12.1. To have global perspectives***

Few participants thought that using English extensively helps students develop a global perspective, for English is an international language. As one participant said, “I do not encourage my students to use their mother tongues...because I want them to have global perspectives.” (P02). Developing a global perspective is increasingly vital to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Having a global perspective equips students to understand and effectively deal with the rapid flow of information, culture and goods. Hence, using English exclusively increases one’s possibility of becoming a global person and simultaneously using L1 impedes this process. The major reason for the instructors’ endorsement of English for teaching and learning was that this is an international language that plays a key role in the internationalization and globalization processes.

### ***3.12.2. To maximize input for English***

Some respondents also remarked that students should not be overtly encouraged to use local languages in the classroom since the medium of instruction in the university education is just English. For instance, participant (P03) argued, “I do not encourage my students to use their mother tongue in class where medium of instruction is English. As this is the context wher[e] my students use English in our reality.” This is to suggest that English is a foreign language in Ethiopian context and hence students do not have the opportunity to use the language outside the classroom. The classroom provides learners with favorable environment to practice and to learn English better. This view is also reflected in the following excerpt of (P07): “Of course I don’t encourage my students to use their mother languages in the classroom. This is because they can use their mother tongue anywhere out of the class. Thus, class time has to be devoted to use English only.”

Another reason for encouraging the use of only English in class is that L1 hinders the process of learning or acquiring English. Second or foreign language learning should happen solely through the TL rather than being linked to the L1. For participant (P06), using L1 should be discouraged because it does not help students learn the English language. That is, successful learning of English

is the result of separating it from the learners' L1. For this effect, participant (P09), not only discourages learners from using their primary languages, but also overtly encourages them to use only L2 (English) as the excerpt given below shows:

No I don't encourage them [students] to use their mother language in the classroom...language is a set of skills which could be developed through practice; and this could happen when students get a chance to practice the language items. Thus, I rather encourage them to use the target language (P09)

On the contrary, few instructors do encourage students to use their primary languages, but based on certain conditions such as a last resort to avoid miscommunication, necessity and the learners' proficiency level of English as well as their ability to use a specific L1 (for the students have different linguistic backgrounds).

### ***3.12.3. A last resort to avoid miscommunication***

Participant (P01) stated that he encourages his students to use their L1s to express their concerns, unclear or doubtful ideas. This participant continued, "As a last resort to avoid communication barrier I let them to tell me for instance using Amharic or Afan Oromo." Being a multilingual teacher, participant (P01) handles learners' feedback which is expressed in either of the two local languages: Amharic and Afan Oromo. Then, it would be possible to find ways of fixing the lack of comprehension.

### **3.13. Encouragement depends on necessity and learners' ability**

A very different response comes from respondent (P10) who emphasized the importance of encouraging the learners' to use their mother tongues when the teacher finds it necessary. According to this view, there are situations in the English classroom that call for the use of local languages. Then, if an instructor finds it necessary for students to apply their L1 to understand a certain grammatical form or notion, L1 would be used as it improves learning.

To use a local language for teaching-learning with English, it is essential that the majority of the students should be able to use this language. Unlike to the other instructors, participant (P04) encourages his students to use Amharic in the class. This is because, "The majority of the students speak Amharic, so it is okay [to use Amharic in the class]."



Equally important is the idea which dictates that use of L1 should depend on gap in learners' English proficiency. As it is expressed by respondent (P01), using native languages is good when the students' command of English is very poor. That is, using learners' L1 in the English class can be beneficial in order to fill in the English proficiency gap observed on the part of the students. Here, the primary role of the L1 is to provide scaffolding in making the classroom environment comprehensible to students who are less proficient in English. Conversely, using local languages would be detrimental if the concerned learners possess the appropriate English proficiency level that enables them to effectively understand what the instructors discuss in the classroom. As a result, in such cases it would be irrelevant and unnecessary to allow the use of L1. It would rather hold the learners back from acquiring the TL.

#### **4. Summary, Conclusion and Implications**

This study was set out mainly to explore the perceptions and experiences of KUE students and teachers in using learners' primary languages in classrooms where teaching-learning is mediated through English.

The data from the student respondents showed that they used L1 in classrooms for different purposes like to analyze challenging ideas, to learn new words, to facilitate group works, etc. The research also informs us that students had positive views towards use of local languages in the teaching learning process. The other area that the research tried to find out from the students was to what extent teachers used local languages in the classrooms for several purposes. According to the analysis from the students' responses, teachers mostly used local languages to facilitate the teaching learning process. Therefore, it is possible to consider that the students had positive feelings towards use and purposes of local languages in KUE classes.

In the same way, the teachers dominantly employed local languages in classrooms for various functions, namely to remedy lack of comprehension, to provide a translation for an unknown TL word or expression, to provide instructions for activities, and to teach grammar explicitly while the language policy stipulated otherwise. The students' languages were mainly employed to avoid

miscomprehension, which in turn may lower affective filters in the process of learning (Meyer 2008). However, teachers used local languages as the last options to overcome the problems they noticed from their students. They asserted that they tried other options like paraphrasing, explaining topics in a simpler language or providing additional examples before they diverted into local language use. The students' low proficiency level in English was pointed out as a major reason for using local languages that may negatively affect their mastery of professional knowledge. One deviation from this is observed in a few English instructors who strongly opposed the use of local languages for teaching English except for content subjects.

Translation and code-switching were found to be the principal strategies that the instructors used primarily to remedy students' lack of comprehension. The majority of the instructors thought neither they violated the MoI, nor committed professional misconduct in resorting to learners' L1s. This contradicts with similar studies that reported as teachers often make clear their moral disapproval of language mixing in the classroom, and feel embarrassed about their translanguaging, describing it as resulting from carelessness and professional misconduct (Creese & Blackledge 2010). The study also implies that the English-only medium of instruction in KUE appeared to disregard the needs of both learners and instructors. Consequently, we call for a flexible language policy for medium of instruction (for teaching both content and language) that would respond to the needs and the linguistic competencies of the students as well as current theories of bi/multilingualism.

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### **Conflict of interest**

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Authors' contribution**

Both authors contributed equally.

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