The Effects of Language Supportive Pedagogy (LSP) in Students' Writing Skills in the Entomology Course at Kotebe University of Education

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Abstract

This study presents the findings of an action research project conducted with final-year biology students at Kotebe University of Education. The study found that students typically expressed their content knowledge as lists and rarely wrote coherent sentences or complete paragraphs. To address this issue, an intervention was designed to explicitly guide students in writing short academic texts across four scientific genres: description, comparison, components, and classification. The effectiveness of the intervention was assessed using a pretest and posttest, along with a student-centered group discussion involving approximately one-third of the class. The results showed that after six weeks, all students were able to produce coherent, well-structured paragraphs using appropriate scientific language. Students credited their progress to the formative feedback provided during the intervention. This study underscores the potential of cross-curricular language support in improving pre-service teachers' writing skills, although its effectiveness relies on collaboration between language and subject teachers. The findings are discussed in the context of previous research in Tanzania, which examined strategies for developing pre-service teachers' pedagogical skills to support learners' language transitions. The study also raises policy considerations regarding the use of home language in higher education institutions where English is the medium of instruction, particularly for science teachers. Finally, the paper advocates for an integrated approach to teacher education in multilingual education systems and identifies priorities for future research.

Key words*:* Language Supportive Pedagogy, Multilingual Education, Professional Collaboration Science Education

1. Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI), particularly in under-resourced and postcolonial education systems, remains a highly debated issue (Milligan & Tikly, 2016, cited in Bowden et al., 2022). English Medium Instruction (EMI), particularly within under-resourced and postcolonial education systems, continues to be widely debated (Milligan & Tikly, 2016, cited in Bowden et al., 2022). Recent studies in instructive linguistics challenge the effectiveness of monolingual approaches that frequently dominate teaching practices in multilingual settings. According to Creese and Blackledge (2010), monolingual instructional practices have historically shaped language teaching, resulting in many teachers adopting a predominantly monolingual mindset in their classroom pedagogy. Consequently, classroom pedagogy often resembles a pseudo-immersion approach that fails to develop grammatical competence or foster originality and creative use of English (Boruah, 2015).

Subtractive Multilingual Education (SMLE) models, which replace learners' first language (L1) with a second language (L2) as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT), can significantly impact students' academic achievement. Research has frequently shown that subtractive language transitions hinder the development of students' literacy in their home languages and negatively affect their overall academic performance (Bowden & Barrett, 2022; May, 2017; Thomas & Collier, 2002). This highlights the potential benefits of using learners' home language in the classroom, as it can increase engagement, enhance participation, and accelerate the development of foundational literacy skills. Despite these advantages, no country in sub-Saharan Africa consistently uses an African language as the medium of instruction at the secondary or tertiary levels, except for some universities in South Africa that use Afrikaans (Brock-Utne, 2015). Large-scale, longitudinal studies consistently demonstrate that additive multilingual education models, which build on learners' existing language skills, are more effective than subtractive models in supporting both language development and subject learning (Bowden et al., 2022).

Both early-exit and late-exit which refer to the point at which English language is being used as medium of instruction could also be another factor determining the success of the students. In putting a clear distinction between early-exit and late exist, Bowden and Barrett (2022) stated that Early-exit transitions occurs when an additional European language of instruction is used in the first

four years of primary (lower primary) school and late-exit transitions takes place between primary and secondary school, or during the secondary phase. The 'switch' to an additional European language of instruction at an early age or later age is a bone of contention among scholars in the area. Unfortunately, when examining models of language use in education across African policy and practice, the vast majority fall under the category of early-exit transitional models (Benson, 2015). In summary, Bowden and Barrett (2022) observed that both early- and late-exit subtractive models are relatively weak compared to additive and flexible models, which support the progressive development of two or more languages in the classroom. Recognizing the global importance of English, Rao (2015) argued that English should be learned effectively but in an additive manner, without undermining learners' other languages, and that it should remain only one component of a country's broader multilingual landscape.

Numerous studies comparing the academic performance of children in multilingual education (MLE) and non-MLE schools have found that students in MLE programs perform significantly better than their peers in non-MLE schools, particularly in subjects such as mathematics, environmental studies, and language (Manocha & Panda, 2015). Additionally, Seid (2019) reported that L1-based MLE in Ethiopia increases both the likelihood of primary school enrollment and the probability of being in the appropriate grade for one's age. Similarly, Ramachandran (2017) found that L1 instruction in the early grades results in an additional half-year of completed schooling and a five percent higher chance of finishing primary school.

This suggests that transitioning from mother-tongue to English instruction poses a significant barrier to students' academic success. In other words, subtractive language policies limit effective teacher-student interaction and tend to reinforce practices such as rote learning, memorization, and copying text directly from the board (Bowden & Barrett; 2022). In addition, subtractive MLE (basic education) at tertiary could exacerbate the matter. Furthering the discussion, Bowden and Barrett (2022) argued that subtractive MLE undermines classroom communication. That is, learning in students' mother tongue is also crucial in enhancing communication skills among students population. Students enjoy school more; they tend to have increased self-esteem and they feel more at home when they employ the home language in the classroom discussion.

The reduced performance of the students might be due to the impoverished learning environment,

and the regrettable language command of teachers. In this regard, Yonas's (2008) subjects kept saying that their [the teachers' deficiency] own deficiency in spoken English prevented them from applying communicative language learning methods in their classroom. Most graduates lack basic communication skills. To worsen matters, students graduated in foreign language (English) were unable to use the language for communication purpose with their students (Yonas, 2008). Reflecting on the Tanzanian context, Mtana and O-saki (2015) observed that English is poorly taught in public primary schools, largely due to a shortage of adequately qualified English teachers, and opportunities for exposure outside the classroom are nearly non-existent. A similar situation has been reported in India, where Boruah (2015) noted that not all teachers in English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools possess sufficient proficiency in English.

Simply designating a dominant language as the medium of instruction does not automatically make it an effective language for classroom communication, nor does it instantly render learners fluent (Benson, 2015). English should not be deemed as a hallmark of excellence, competence, and the benchmark of a genius. The foreign language obsession syndrome would pave the way to overlook the major goals of education. Sometimes, the strong emphasis on dominant languages such as English or French can overshadow other essential educational goals, including literacy development, critical thinking, and acquiring knowledge across the curriculum (Benson,2015). After all, the sole motive of language is to communicate, not to subjugate which is a reflection of intellectual backwardness. This highlights the limitations of many Western language learning theories when applied in African contexts and underscores the need for a paradigm shift in approaches to bilingual and multilingual education on the continent (Brock-Utne, 2015).

In light of this, employing two or more languages in education is not only valuable during transitional periods but is also recognized for its broader educational benefits (Clegg & Simpson, 2016). For instance, dropout rates decrease as students are more motivated to stay in school when instruction is delivered in their home language (Kadel, 2015). Using students' first language as the medium of instruction also facilitates a smoother transition between home and school environments. Furthermore, when learners engage in their own language, they can develop strong oral skills, which can positively support the acquisition of a second or foreign language.

Ethiopia, as a multilingual country, is home to a wide variety of languages. Recognizing the pedagogical benefits of mother-tongue instruction and the rights of different nationalities to promote their languages, primary education is delivered in local languages (MoE, 1994). Since

1994, over 20 languages have been used as mediums of instruction up to grades 4, 6, or 8, depending on regional conditions (MoE, 2002). Typically, local languages serve as the medium of instruction from grades 1–6 or 1–4, after which English becomes the medium through to tertiary education. Despite this policy, students' proficiency in English remains very low. Both teachers and students demonstrate limited competence in English (Bekalu, 2011; Yonas, 2008), with many graduates lacking fundamental English communication skills and the overall quality of English use among students being poor.

The introduction of multilingual education (MLE) has been essential to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students. MLE is defined as the use of two or more languages as mediums of instruction in subjects other than the languages themselves (Anderson & Boyer, 1978). However, its implementation in Ethiopia has been politicized, often framed as a right of nationalities to promote their own languages rather than as a pedagogical strategy to enhance children's learning in their mother tongue. While Ethiopia has been effective in using mother tongues to support literacy and learning, it has underutilized bi- or multilingual approaches, limiting the potential effectiveness of second-language instruction in Amharic (Benson, 2010).

English only medium instruction could limit the performance, participation and knowledge production on the part of the students. The national Grade 8 assessment score (from 2000, 2004 and 2008) indicated that students taught and assessed in their L1 for eight years outperformed those taught and assessed in English (L3) (Benson,2015). Expanding on this discussion, Boruah (2015) highlighted experiences from India, noting that classrooms often do not support learner-generated language. Instead, the classroom culture emphasizes students listening attentively to the teacher and responding only when prompted. This ritualistic approach to teaching limits the use of English to question-and-answer routines, constraining opportunities for meaningful language practice.

It is the convection of the researchers that classroom transactions need to be hybridized and there is also unrestricted use of non-English languages in the teaching of science subjects. To this end, pedagogical strategies that necessitate language supportive pedagogy, code switching, and trans-languaging should be taken into consideration. Owing to this, this study tries to examine the effects of using more than one language as a medium of instruction in teaching vocabulary and writing in Biology classes. A switch to English as the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary

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education could deter students from exploiting their potential and may deny multilingual spaces in their classroom. Owing to this, this study will try to assess the effect of creating multilingual spaces on the performance of biology students on writing tasks. In the Ethiopian context, few studies have been done in the area of language policy but not in the area of multilingual pedagogy. Cohen (2010) raised concerns about the equity of the process in introducing different languages. Daniel and Abebayehu (2006) examined language planning and policy changes, while Küspert (2014) analyzed language policy and social identity in the context of Ethiopia's socio-political transformations. However, none of these studies conducted an empirical analysis of the language of instruction in Ethiopia. This study, therefore, addresses that gap in the literature.

The general objective of this study is to investigate the impact of LSP on students' writing skills in the Entomology course at KUE. In light of this general objective, the specific objectives of the study are to:

> ➢ evaluate students' skills for writing within a specific Entomology course;
> ➢ examine the benefits of the intervention in students' writing skill within the specific genre.

2.   Methodology

A quasi-experimental design was used as a research design and the sample of the population of the study was third year Biology students at Kotebe University of Education (KUE). One class of students (sixteen in number) was used for the study (pre and post-tests were given). The aim of the study was to examine the effects of the pedagogical strategies that necessitate language supportive pedagogy, code switching, and trans-languaging that support the use of additional language in the classroom in students' writing skills into the Entomology course at KUE. The course 'Entomology', the study of insects, was selected because one of the researchers taught the course 'Entomology' by the time the study was being done. Owing to this, this study tried to examine the effects of using more than one language as a medium of instruction in teaching vocabulary and writing in biology classes.

After introducing LSP, both language teachers and biology teachers planned the teaching session together. During the intervention, the researchers (both English and biology teachers) identified sub-topics for vocabulary learning and subgenre writing for the course Entomology. Next, the pre-test was carried out first; and students were reminded the vocabulary taught in the Entomology course. Later, an English teacher, a member of the research team, taught the planned session. A

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total of six weeks was used for the intervention classes. The intervention was made in the regular class schedule. The subject matter biology teacher who was a member of the research team briefed the students about the importance of the intervention class for the course he had been teaching. After six weeks, the post-test was administrated. Both tests were administered to the same group of students (one before the intervention and other after the intervention).

To get further insights, a post session focus group discussion with students and interview with teachers were carried out. For the FGD, the group was heterogeneous; that is, all the subjects had different background in terms of age and gender. Regarding the number of participants in a group, a total of six students took part in the FGD. In the process of data collection, the nature of the intervention class, the advantages of using two languages in the teaching learning process, the skills that students developed during the intervention class and related issues were thoroughly examined. The researchers followed a non-directive style of moderating. We tried to exclude any inhibiting impact and subjects did not refrain themselves from entering into the discussion. Two biology teachers at KUE took part in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interviewees were selected based on gender so that a representative sample of participants could be surveyed. In the semi-structured interview, the participants were asked about Language Supportive Pedagogy (LSP) and their experiences in the teaching of biology. The interview was used to triangulate the data. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Again the interview was carried out in Amharic.

Data collected from respondents through pre- and post- tests, interview and FGD were processed thoroughly to check for completeness, accuracy and uniformity of the gathered data. For the pre- and post-test analysis, the analytical framework for genre analysis was adopted from (Polias, 2016). Both pre-test and posttest assessments were conducted so as to evaluate genre-writing skills. The contents of the lesson were Entomology course and students were assessed for each genre (description, comparison, components and classification).

For the purpose of the analysis, the achievement of the students was grouped into three (high, medium, low achievers). These students' writings were assessed in terms of grammar and course-specific vocabulary. These students were evaluated for each genre (one paragraph for each genre) and the results of the tests were marked based on marking rubric for genre writing. Ethical research protocol was followed and all the participants willingly took part in the study. Students were told

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that their names would be masked from the analysis and from the data by assigning pseudonyms.

3. Results and Discussion

Findings from the pre- and post- tests

As it can be seen from the students' writings given below, students showed a lot of improvements in their writings. As a representative sample, let us examine the pre- and the post- tests results of the students.
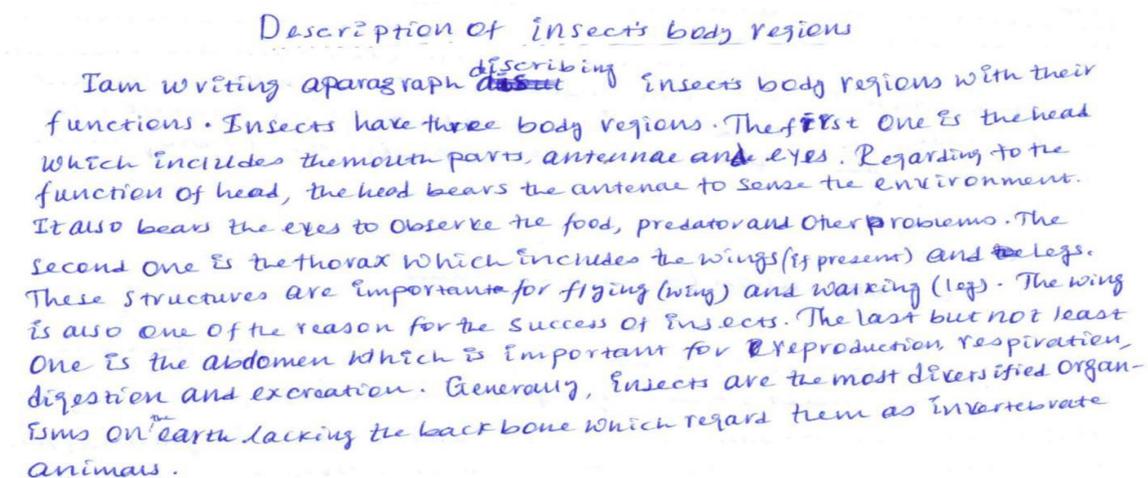
Genre   type-Description

Pre-test /top-level student/
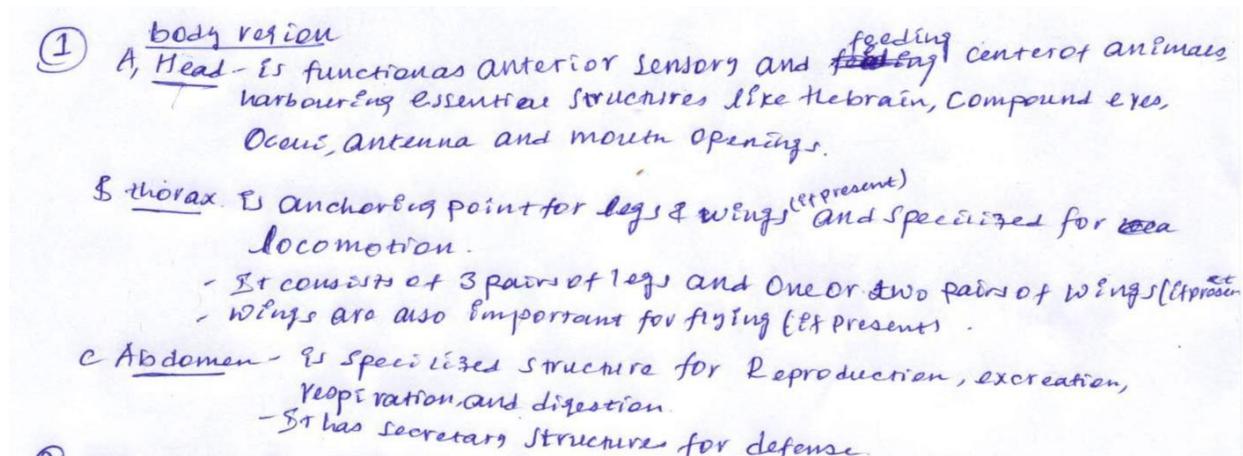
Genre   type-Description

Post-test/top-level student/

Genre type-Comparison

Pre-test/average-level student/

② Filiform is linear, slender while geniculate is elbowed. Their similarity is both are Consists of basal scape
  -pedicel
  -flagerated

Genre type-Comparison

Post-test/average-level student/

2. Comparision of insects antennae

I am writing a paragraph comparing the filiform and geniculate antennae. Geniculate antennae is a bent like in elbow shape. It is used for sense of smell. The bees and ants are the best example of Geniculate antennae. Similarly, filiform antennae is a type of antennae having a thread like structure with many segments. Filiform antennae is used to guide the entry of pollen tube. The cockroaches are the one the best example of filiform antennae. Generally, insects have which is different type of antennae with different shape and with their different importance.

Genre type-Classification

Pre-test/low-level student/

(4) head oryntation deviding into three
① hypognathouse. Mouth part is Ventral in continous with legs is probably primitive example grass hoper
2. Prognathouse. Mouth part is antipaior position & point forward & found predaceous

Opistognathouse. Suking mouth part legs extending for ~~made~~ back in front legs

Genre type-Classification

Post-test/low-level student/

Insect head classification

I am writing a paragraph on the insects head classification. Insects have three types of head. The first is Hypognathus. It is below jaw. for example grass hopper. The second is prognathus, it is infront of jaw. for example beetles. The last is opistognatus. It is be hind jaw. For example bugs head is nation doeses, Generally, Insects head bears the eyes, antanae and the mouth parts.

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As indicated in the sample descriptions above, there is an enormous difference between the pretest and the posttest results of the students. In the pretest assessment, students produced discrete phrases and words that did not really describe the aim of the piece of writing. However, in the posttest assessment, students were able to produce organized ideas presented in a form of a paragraph. This finding was corroborated with the findings of the qualitative data. Both the FGD and the interview were good testaments. The following representative excerpts exemplify this issue further.

Haimanot in the FGD has addressed the following points

> *Before this section, I did not know the rules to write a paragraph; so, my paragraph writing skill was poor. But now, I know the steps to write a good paragraph like topic sentences, developer statement and a conclusion sentence that summarizes the topic. I have a good skill on how to write a paragraph that are organized, coherent, and are all related to a single topic.*

Alem in the FGD session noted:

> *The intervention class has helped us a lot in developing our writing skill. We developed a good understating on how to use organized ideas in a paragraph form.*

Similarly, Dawit has the following to say:

> *We usually write phrases or issues by using dot, not in a sentence form. We did not have such type of lesson before. Within a short period of time, we developed a solid understanding on how a paragraph is being organized and written.*

As per the data above, students showed progress in their writing. The reasonable explanation for students producing such paragraphs could be the nature of the strategies that the teacher used. In the teaching-learning process, the teacher embraced more flexible language use. That is, during the intervention class, students and the teacher communicated by switching between English and Amharic and this could enable students to understand the contents of the lesson. Regarding the importance of creating multilingual space in the classroom, Melkamu, in the FGD, has noted the points below:

> *Using home language (Amharic) together with English helped me to develop conceptual understanding and basic learning skills and in short, it leads to a better educational outcome. In addition, I believe teachers may also address the lesson and teach more*

> *effectively when they use native language to elaborate some new concepts. We like classes where we use both languages since those classes are more interactive.*

Furthermore, Belay participating in the FGD has addressed the points below:

> *In the intervention class, we easily understood the lesson when the teacher used our home language. But there are some teachers who do not use Amharic and we do not understand the concept.*

In a similar manner, Roman, a teacher, who took part in the interview, has addressed the points below:

> *I believe using local language especially when introducing a new concepts and vocabulary to students is important. Because I have to make sure that they understand what the new topic is dealing about. In addition it may help them to associate the new lesson with their already existing knowledge.*

As shown in the data above, the reason for the students' progress has been attributed to the strategies used by the teacher. This further indicated that multilingual strategies seemed to have immense potential for the academic progress of the students. These studies, among others, suggest a need for opening up multilingual spaces in classrooms for epistemic access and effective learning (Kiramba, 2018). That is, teachers who can support students to learn the contents of the lesson need to create multilingual spaces in the classrooms. Sharing the experience of India, Rao (2015) noted that English-medium teaching makes learning difficult for most Indian students and a mother-tongue medium education facilitates learning.

It was learnt that only-English medium instruction could silence students' engagement in learning. Sara, a teacher who participated in the interview session addressed the following point:

> *In most of my classes I have observed that most students hold back from engaging in classroom discussions if they are not able to transfer such knowledge into the language of instruction.*

In relation to this, Hanna during the FGD noted the points below:

> *We do not participate and listen attentively when the lesson is delivered totally in English because there are a lot of new vocabularies. Thus, I believe it is a good approach to*

> *translate those words to local language because this approach helps us to understand the contents of the lesson without difficulty and develops our listening skill.*

As it can be seen from the responses of Sara and Hanna, using English as a medium of instruction could limit student participation in the classroom and this further restricts knowledge production. Children learn through active participation in classroom activities, but meaningful engagement in classroom discourse is difficult unless students first understand and can relate to the concepts being discussed (Manocha & Panda, 2015). The dialogic nature of classroom discourse, combined with the use of children's language and everyday-life examples, fostered an inter-subjective space that facilitated meaningful discussions on the topic (Durairajan, 2015). The plausible explanation for students not participating in the classroom discussion could be the language barrier. That is, the teaching learning process does not use the children's linguistic resources and knowledge. Consequently, many disadvantaged children, whose parents aspire to secure a better future for them through the perceived empowering benefits of English-medium education, often end up developing limited proficiency in English and demonstrating low levels of overall academic achievement (Mohanty, 2015).

Learning outcomes improve when students are able to openly express their ideas to teachers and peers using an additional language as the medium of instruction (Kadel, 2015). Instruction in a student's mother tongue further enhances comprehension and enables them to connect more effectively with classroom discourse. In other words, English only environment which may impact learning may not help students to conceptualize what the science teacher teaches. Thus, in some cases, it is important to use either code switching or language supportive pedagogy which is a classroom strategy that supports the learning of content through an additional language (Bowden & Barrett, 2022).

In light of the above discussion, it is important to closely examine the benefits of using learners' home languages in the classroom when necessary. The exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction has often contributed to high student failure rates. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to use students' first language to draw on their existing linguistic and cognitive capacities. The first language can serve as a tool for thinking, reflection, and planning ideas before expressing them in English (Durairajan, 2015). Moreover, the use of students' home languages in instruction can enhance their participation in the learning process and promote faster learning, creativity, and innovation.

4. Conclusion

This article presents findings from a small-scale action research study conducted with final-year students at Kotebe University of Education. The study found that biology majors often wrote paragraphs as lists and struggled to produce coherent, complete paragraphs. To address this, an intervention was designed to explicitly guide students in composing short academic texts across four scientific genres: description, comparison, components, and classification. The effectiveness of the intervention was assessed through pre- and post-tests, focus group discussions, and interviews. Results indicated that after six weeks, all students were able to write coherent, well-structured paragraphs using appropriate scientific language, and they credited their improvement to the formative feedback received throughout the intervention. As the findings reveal, there was a marked difference in students' writing in the pretest and posttest results. That is, giving bilingual space in the classroom during discussions favored student. This finding further indicates that the use of LSP for science student teachers is crucial for strengthening their mastery of subject content. It suggests that bilingual classroom instruction can potentially enhance students' understanding of subject matter by promoting more active classroom interaction and engagement.

5. Implications

English only environment may not help students conceptualize the fundamental contents of the science subject that the science teachers teach. Thus, the use of the students' home language as medium of instruction through code switching or language supportive pedagogy could make students involved in the learning process and it speeds up learning, innovation and creativity. The policy implications of using home language as the medium of instruction in HEIs where English is the language of instruction should be considered for science teachers.

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Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally.

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