

Examining Relationships among Students' Grade Level, Attitude and Use of First Language in English Classroom

(With Particular Reference to Suhul Michael General Secondary School)

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Abstract: *The main purpose of this study was to examine whether there is significant relationships among the students' grade level, attitude and usage of first language in English classroom. In this study the attitude of the four grade level (grade 9-12) students toward first language use in EFL classroom was also investigated. The study was Co-relational research which involved quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The participants of the study were grade nine, ten, eleven and twelve students of Suhul Michael Secondary School. The sampling size was 250 students. These samples were selected using stratified sampling method. To reach the study on the intended stage, different data gathering and analysis tools were used. To gather data from the intended group questionnaire, observation and interview were used. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0. The primarily statistical analysis utilized were descriptive statistics, one way ANOVA, Pearson correlation coefficient and percentage. The result of the study indicated that grade nine, ten and eleven students have positive attitude toward the implementation of Tigrigna language in English session. But grade twelve students have negative attitude toward Tigrigna language use. The findings also showed that there is significant negative relationship between the students' grade level and attitude toward Tigrigna language use in English lesson. But there is medium positive relationship between the students' attitude and perceived use of Tigrigna language in English class. The output of the study also revealed that grade nine and ten students use Tigrigna language much frequently in English class whereas grade eleven and twelve students rarely use it in English session. The results of the study also exploit that certain amount of Tigrigna language has been used in English class. 3.73% of Tigrigna against 96.27% of English language has been used in English class. To utter this amount of Tigrigna and English language words 3.49 and 96.51 percent of time was devoted respectively. From the total amount of Tigrigna language words high percentage (2.97%) of Tigrigna language words was incorporated in grade nine English classes.*

Keywords: First Language, Mother Tongue, English as a Foreign Language, Teaching of English as Foreign Language

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The debate over whether English language classroom should include or exclude students' native language has been a contentious issue for a long time (Brown quoted in Miles, 2004). Also researchers have varied opinion at which stage the use of L1 (first language) is most beneficial for the learners. The proponent of monolingual approach believed that exposure to the language is vital in the development of their linguistic skills. Phillipson, as cited in Miles (2004), reinforced the idea of using only the target language to maximize exposure and consequently learning.

Advocators of bilingual approach, on the other hand, suggested that first language can be a facilitating factor and just not an interfering factor. Tang (2002) conducted a research in China with Chinese speakers and the study showed that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom does not reduce students' exposure to English but rather can assist in the teaching and learning process.

Similarly, in Ethiopian context, some research sights indicated that the students' mother tongue is used for multi-purpose. For instance, a study was conducted by Yoseph reviewed in Nuru (2008) on the use of Amharic in English class. The result of the study indicated that students use Amharic to ask questions and to explain irrelevant concepts

to their peers. Likewise, the teacher uses Amharic to perform the functions of explaining, summarizing, evaluating, giving instructions and checking attendance.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although the issue on the use of L1 in English has been a debatable issue among researchers, the use of Ethiopian vernacular languages in the teaching process of English is common in Ethiopia due to many reasons. One reason is that some Ethiopian secondary school teachers are not more competent in the target language. The researcher had got a chance to observe the teaching learning process of grade nine and ten English class during practicum experience. Therefore, the researcher recognized that some teachers were not more proficient on the target language. So they preferred to address the intended knowledge to the students through the medium of L1. The researcher also asked some students on the usage of L1 and they reported that students may afraid to express their personal feeling through the target language. So they believe that if the students' mother tongue (MT) is used in the English class, the barriers and tensions created among the students can be reduced. Another reason for incorporating L1 in foreign language classroom is the learning experience of the students at elementary schools. Since the foundation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995) and adoption of Education Training Policy (ETP) (1996), over 23 nations and nationality languages have started to serve as a medium of instruction at elementary schools (Legesse, 2009). Accordingly, Tigrigna is one of the nation languages that

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serve as a working language in offices and as a medium of instruction at elementary schools of Tigray region. As a result, the students could periodically slip back in to their mother tongue.

In addition, the researcher taught grade nine students for a month during practicum experience and heard some students saying that L1 is useful sometimes to create mutual understanding between the students and teachers. The researcher also heard some students asking the teacher using L1 in the English class. Therefore, it is a norm to use limited amount of MT in secondary schools.

However, the frequency of L1 that should be employed at each grade level was not investigated. In fact, there were some research studies that show a certain amount of L1 use in English class. Atkinson (1987), for instance, suggested that 5% of native language should be used in the foreign language process. Another similar research was also conducted by Durword, Kaufman and Shapson as cited in Kenenisa (2003) on French students in western Canada. And then they found that 75% of the target language and 25% of the mother tongue as the acceptable amount by the teachers. But these two findings did not show evidence of at which grade level the given quantity is applicable. In addition, the amount of L1 used in the two findings is not similar. Therefore, there is a need for investigation in the area.

In addition, the most and least users of L1 in English classrooms are not clearly specified in the literature. In fact, there were some empirical studies which were conducted at all grade levels, but they did not clearly show the situations and grade levels in which the students' L1 predominantly employed.

Furthermore, there is no research evidence as to whether there are differences in attitude toward the use of MT in EFL classroom across different grade levels. Therefore, it is important to examine the attitude of students towards the use of MT in English classroom.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The research had the following general objective as well as specific objectives:

1.3.1 General Objective

The overall objective of this study was to examine relationships among the students' grade level, attitude and use of MT in the foreign language classroom.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

The main specific objectives of the research were to:

- 1) Identify the attitude of the students toward the use of L1 in English lesson.
- 2) Explore whether there are any significant differences in attitude among the four grade levels or not.
- 3) Examine whether there are significant differences on the perceived use of MT among the four grade levels or not.
- 4) Investigate whether there are any significant relationships among students' grade level, attitude and use of mother

tongue or not.

- 5) Find out the frequency of first language used across the four grade levels.
- 6) Define the role of MT in English class across the four grade levels.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 The Role of L1 in Language Teaching

The students' L1 has pedagogical, psychological and socio-cultural value in the EFL classroom. Students always make inferences based on the existing knowledge they have accumulated. This existed knowledge can be employed in EFL classroom for several situations. It can be used to teach the four macro skills and sub skills of language, to give instructions, to enhance collaborative learning and facilitate teacher-student interactions (Gabrielatos, 2001; Seng, 2006; Nazary, 2008). In addition, introducing the daily lesson with the help of L1 can reduce the psychological barriers to English learning and consequently facilitate students' foreign language learning. Auerbach (1993) revealed that "starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learner' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves" (p19). Moreover, students' first language has socio-cultural value. The classroom culture and the culture of the community in which they live is a base for helping students to make an analogy of the target language. The EFL classroom is the place in which different cultures and attitudes of students are reflected. "Use of mother tongue is a signal to the children that their language and culture have value, and this will have a beneficial effects on self perceptions, attitudes, motivations and consequently, on achievement" (Garrett et al in Mattioli, 2004).

3. Research Methods

3.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were grade nine up to twelve students of Suhul Michael secondary school.

3.2 Sampling Size and Sampling Technique

The total number of the students was 1260. From the total number of the students 19.8% of them were selected as participants of the study representing the target population using stratified random sampling method. In order to select each sample, the general statistics of the students was collected from the school record office. Stratified sampling was used to allocate the total number of sample cases to be selected from the strata. Sample size was determined for each stratum proportionally. Simple random sampling method was applied in order to select each member of the sample from each stratum.

3.3 Data Gathering Instruments

Data was gathered through three research tools. These tools were questionnaires, observation and interview.

3.4 Methods of Data Analysis

The data obtained from the respondents was analyzed through quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0. The researcher used mean, standard deviation, one sample t-test and one way ANOVA to examine whether there were significant differences in attitude and perceived usage of L1 among the four grade levels. Pearson correlation coefficient was also employed to determine relationships among students' grade level, attitude and perceived use of MT in English class. The researcher used percentage to analyze actual use of L1 and English language words uttered in English class and to investigate the occasions in which first language is used at each grade level which were recorded through tape recorder. The data obtained from the interviewee was also analyzed qualitatively to check consistency of data obtained through questionnaire and observation.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Results and Discussions

The first objective of the study was to identify students' attitudes toward the use of Tigrigna language in English classroom. To allocate the differences different statistical analysis techniques were employed.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of students' attitude toward MT use

Grade level	No	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grade 9	104	52.22	5.46
Grade 10	100	53.98	4.79
Grade11	22	40.32	7.04
Grade 12	24	37.25	8.00
Total	250	50.44	7.98

The above table shows that the mean score of the respondents in measure of attitudes of grade nine students was found to be significantly higher (52.2) than the expected mean (39). The result indicates that grade nine had statistically significant attitude toward the MT use ($t= 1.03$, $df= 103$, $p<0.05$).

Similarly, the table also revealed that the mean score of grade ten is 53.98. This indicates that it is greater than the average score. The result of one sample t-test was found to be statistically significant attitude toward the MT use ($t= 1.01$, $df= 99$, $p< 0.05$). Therefore, what can be understood from this figure is that grade nine and ten students have positive attitude toward Tigrigna language use in English class. Likewise, the result of one sample t-test indicated that grade eleven students showed positive attitude toward mother tongue use. The result was found to be slightly higher (40.3) than the mean score of the test value (39). This result showed that grade eleven agreed to some extent on the use of MT in English classroom.

On the other hand, the result of the t-test showed that the mean score of grade twelve was found lower, but it was not significantly lower (37.2) than the test value (39). This implies that grade twelve students opposed to some extent on the use of first language in their classroom.

The mean differences between grades nine and eleven, grades

nine and twelve, grade ten and eleven, grade ten and twelve students were statistically significant ($P<0.05$). On the other hand, the mean comparison indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between grades nine and ten in one hand, grades eleven and twelve students on the other. This implies that there is statistically significant difference among the students' attitude toward L1 use in English class. The result also shows that grade nine and ten students have a strong positive attitude toward the use of L1 in English lesson at high school level. And grade eleven students have medium positive attitude towards the use of L1 in English class, but grade twelve students have negative attitude toward MT use in English classroom.

Examining whether there is significant difference on perceived use of Tigrigna language among the four grade levels was another objective of the study. To examine the mean score difference of students' perceived use of MT in English class, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used. Table II shows the results.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of students' perceived use of Tigrigna language in English classroom

Grade level	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Grade 9	104	49.4327	7.49727
Grade 10	100	52.0300	5.28473
Grade 11	22	41.1818	10.22898
Grade 12	24	39.6250	5.24871
Total	250	48.8040	7.95757

As it is showed above, grade nine students seemed to use their MT much frequently in English classroom. The result was found to be statically significant at ($t=1.03$, $df= 103$, $p<0.05$). The result of one sample t-test also showed that the mean score of grade nine students was found to be significantly (49.2) higher than the mean score of the test value (42).

Similarly, the data indicated that grade ten students were in a favor of using L1 much frequently in English class. The result of one sample t-test revealed that the mean score of grade ten was found to be significantly (52) higher than the mean score of the test value (42). The result was found to be statically significant at ($t= 1.01$, $df= 99$, $p<0.05$). This implies that grade ten students almost use their mother tongue in English class. In contrast, the result of one sample t-test displayed that the mean score of grade eleven was found (41.1) lower than the test value (42). The result indicated that grade eleven students used statistically less amount of MT in English classroom ($t= 2.074$, $df= 21$, $p<0.05$).

In addition, the data indicated that grade twelve students tend to use their mother tongue less frequently. The result of the t-test indicated that the mean score of grade twelve students was found to be (39.6) lower than the test value (42) at ($t=2.064$, $df= 23$, $p<0.05$). This express that grade twelve students rarely use their mother tongue in English classroom.

The results also revealed that the differences between grades nine and eleven, grades nine and twelve, grades ten and eleven and grades ten and twelve students were statistically different ($p<0.05$).

On the other side, the mean differences between grades nine

and ten, grades eleven and twelve were not significantly different. This result revealed that there were statistically differences among the grade levels on the perceived use of MT. The result of the study indicated that grades nine and ten students use L1 much frequently than grade eleven and twelve students.

The other objective of the study was to examine relationships among the students' grade level, attitude and use of Tigrigna language in English classroom. To estimate the relationships among the variables, Pearson correlation coefficient was used. Table III show the result.

Table 3: Inter- correlation among grade level, attitude and perceived use of MT

Correlation coefficient variables			
	X1	X2	X3
Grade level (X1)	1		
Attitude (X2)	-.560**	1	
Perceived use (X3)	-.364**	.586**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

As it is clearly shown in the above table, there was also a significant negative relationship between grade level and attitude ($r = -0.560$). This implies that as students' grade level increases their attitude toward MT use becomes negative. Similarly, there was also negative relationship between grade level and perceived use of MT ($r = -0.364$). But there is moderate positive relationship between attitude and perceived use of MT ($r = 0.586$). This result indicates that as the students' attitude increases, their perceived use of MT also increases.

To find out the amount of Tigrigna and English language words uttered in English class and the time spent to it at each grade level percentage was used. The number of words uttered were counted and converted in to percentage. Eight English classes, two each of the four grade levels were recorded so as to define the proportion of Tigrigna and English and the time spent to each language. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: The proportion of Tigrigna and English language words and the amount of time spent to each.

Grade level	Lesson	Time of recording (in minutes)	Total English language words uttered	%	Total Tigrigna language words	%	Time taken to utter total English language words (in minutes)	%	Time taken to utter total Tigrigna language words (in minutes)	%
Grade 9	L1	30	1072	13.49	61	0.77	28' 23"	12.45	1' 37"	0.71
	L2	29	959	12.07	175	2.20	24' 31"	10.75	4' 29"	1.96
Grade 10	L1	20	441	5.55	8	0.10	19' 38"	8.61	22"	0.16
	L2	25	798	9.88	15	0.19	24' 32"	10.76	28"	0.20
Grade 11	L1	30	1079	13.58	3	0.04	29' 55"	13.12	05"	0.04
	L2	30	1179	14.83	17	0.21	29' 34"	12.92	26"	0.19
Grade 12	L1	36	1276	16.05	10	0.13	35' 43"	15.67	17"	0.12
	L2	28	853	10.73	7	0.09	27' 46"	12.18	14"	0.10
Grand total		228	7652	96.27	296	3.73	220' 08"	96.51	7' 57"	3.49

Note: L1 and L2 refers to lesson one and lesson two respectively.

The result of the audio-recorded lesson also indicated that the amount of L1 and English language words uttered in English class was different across the four grade levels. The students' mother tongue was found to be as a very useful for beginner secondary school students. Results of the audio-recorded data also revealed that the time devoted to utter L1 and English language words was significantly different from one grade level to another grade level. As the grade level increase the time devoted to utter first language words decrease. But as the grade level increase the amount of English words and the time devoted to it increase.

Similarly, the researcher recorded the interaction of the teacher and students using audio-recorder in order to investigate the function of Tigrigna language across the four grade levels. To analyze the occasions in which MT used in English class percentage was used. First, the occasions were counted and put in number on the blank sheet. Then, the function or occasions of MT were converted in to percentage. Table 5 shows the results.

Table 5: The function of Tigrigna language in English class and its proportion across the four grade levels

Grade Level	Lesson	The occasions in which Tigrigna language is used													
		Asking questions	%	Explaining grammar rules	%	Checking comprehension	%	Giving instructions	%	Translating a text from L1 to L2	%	Translating words	%	Correcting students' disciplinary problems	%
Grade 9	L1	3	6	5	10	4	8	3	6	7	14	1	2	-	-
	L2	7	14	2	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grade 10	L1	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	L2	2	4	-	-	1	2	2	4	-	-	-	-	1	2
Grade 11	L1	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-
	L2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	4	-	-	-	-
Grade 12	L1	1	2	1	2	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	1	2
	L2	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total		15	30	9	18	5	10	6	12	10	20	1	2	2	4

Note: L1 and L2 refer to lesson one and lesson two, respectively

The classroom observation results also revealed that L1 was used in the four grade level English class for different purposes. High percentage of mother tongue was used for asking questions, followed by translating a text from second to first language, explaining grammar rules, giving instruction, checking comprehension, correcting students' disciplinary problems and translating words.

Results of the interview also showed that the students and their respective teachers use L1 in English class. The students responded that they and their English teachers sometimes use L1 in English session for different purposes. Accordingly, they replied that their English teachers use MT to explain the meaning of unfamiliar words and to clarify unclear concepts. The students themselves use L1 to ask oral questions to their teacher and to talk with their classmates during group discussion.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

The overall result of the study portrayed that the students' first language was used throughout grade levels for different purposes. Especially, grades nine, and ten students and their respective teachers tend to use much amount of mother tongue words in English classroom. This shows that students' usage of L1 could highly be influenced by their grade levels. But the overuse of L1 might have a negative side effect on the teaching learning process. Therefore, standing from these conclusions, the researcher recommends the following points.

5.2 Recommendation

As indicated in the review of related literature and in the conclusion of the present study, students mother tongue was found to be essential for beginner secondary school students like grades nine and ten students to compensate their deficiency on the target language. But English teachers should know when and how to employ first language in English classroom. Since exclusive use of MT is counterproductive, teachers and students should be aware of the problem behind it.

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