



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**EXTENT OF MOTHER-TONGUE USE IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM**Megersa Bejiga^{1*}, Tamiru Olana², Zeleke Teshome³^{1*}(Department of English Language, Addis Ababa Science and Technology University);²(Department of English Language and Literature, Wollega University, Nekemte, Ethiopia)³(Department of English Language and Literature, Wollega University, Ethiopia)E-mail: megigreat@gmail.comDoi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10113>**ABSTRACT**

The usage of the mother-tongue in EFL classroom should not go beyond what is necessary for effective target language learning. Most studies are concerned with how MT is used in TL classroom than how much it is used. This study, therefore, aimed to investigate the extent mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use by teachers and students in grade nine. A case study research design was used in which observation was the main data collection tool, and data was analyzed quantitatively. The result of teachers' extent of mother-tongue use showed a ratio of 11% MT to 89% TL. This implied that teachers' use of MT is considered optimal as (Macaro's, 2011) standard that teachers' should use 80% of lesson time in TL. On the other hand, students' finding showed a ratio of 47% of MT to 53% of TL use. It implied that students' use of MT is well beyond what is considered optimal by (Atkinson's, 1987) standard that a ratio of about 5% native language to about 95% TL may be more profitable. Students' incompetence in TL was seen as major factor for students' use of MT in English classroom. Based on these findings, the researcher recommended that students should be given sufficient opportunity to use TL in English classroom, and teachers should also be well trained on how to manage MT use in English classroom.

Keywords: *Mother-tongue (MT), Target language (TL), Extent of MT use in TL classroom*



INTRODUCTION

The use of a mother-tongue in English classroom is an argumentative issue that has been discussed for years. It has so been a subject of research interest still now. Most research works acknowledged the importance of using English in EFL classes for successful target language learning. However, little study has been done on how students' mother tongue should be used in EFL classroom. Because of this, there is a controversy concerning whether the target language and the mother-tongue should be used together or not. The key point of dispute is when and how much mother-tongue should be used, and how much target language input is required to maximize target language development.

According to Macaro (2005), several perspectives on target language and mother-tongue use exist. One perspective holds the conviction that mother-tongue has little or no educational or communicative value for English language development. As to Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input theory, exposing students to extensive period of target language input ensures mastery of it. Swain (1985) supported this theoretical foundation by stating that creating the target language setting is an integral part of the learning process. Learners must be given the opportunity to develop both written and oral output. Furthermore, (McDonald, 1993 & Wong-Fillmore, 1985) maintained this notion by asserting that using target language in EFL classroom will increase students' motivation because they will recognize how important the target language is. The promotion of exclusive target language use has led

language professionals and teachers to view TL use as the most important practice in EFL context.

There have been strong challenges to this perspective of exclusive use of target language in EFL context. As to (Macaro, 2000), mother-tongue use in EFL classroom is necessary, and can also be an effective teaching strategy when used appropriately to support students' TL development by using it as a reference point and helping construct meaning. According to Cook (2001, p. 418) mother-tongue can be optional when the target language be challenging for students and when it enhances students' grasp of particular concept.

I as the researcher believe that despite the fact mother-tongue may play a facilitative role in target language learning, it will have a significant awkward impact on students target language development if not systematically used. Particularly in Ethiopian context, mother-tongue use in English classroom needs to be studied as the quality of the English language is deteriorating from time to time, as evidenced by some local researches. Mother-tongue instruction at the lower level, according to these studies, has contributed to the decline of English at the higher level. Students who were being instructed in their mother-tongue at primary level may encounter a new challenge of taking English as a medium of instruction at higher level. The transition from *Mother-Tongue Education (MTE)* to *English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI)* may have a negative impact on their education in general, and English in particular. For example, (Tekeste, 2006, p. 32) stated that the quality of Ethiopian education is



in danger due to students' inadequate knowledge of English. He further commented:

The nature of the decline in the quality of education that prevails at secondary schools mainly concerns the capacity of the students to follow their lessons in English. The education policy of 1994 and the subsequent growth of the use of vernaculars [local languages] for instruction further weakened the position and status of English among teachers and students. (p. 32).

The 1994 education and training policy of Ethiopia mandated that English be used as the medium of instruction in governmental schools beginning from grade nine. Even though the curriculum makes no remark of situations in which mother-tongue can be used in English classroom, it has been observed that students frequently use their mother-tongue in this classroom. Because English is not widely used outside of the classroom, students will not receive adequate exposure of the target language. Many students, according to Tekeste (2006), have a very poor command of the English language. Though English is the medium of instruction in high school and university, there is a lot of room for mother-tongue like Amharic and Afan Oromo to be used in English classroom. Moreover, Tekeste (2006) revealed in his study that English has been one of the main obstacles in the educational system because mother-tongue is so regularly used in this classroom. On his part, (Jemal, 2012) stated that it is even disputed if English is genuinely the medium of instruction in Ethiopian context because the usage of mother tongue in this classroom may be even more prevalent than English.

Though mother-tongue use in English classrooms is an inevitable occurrence in most EFL situations, excessively use of it will surely lead to an over-reliance on mother tongue, which will hinder target language learning. Excessive use of MT, according to some scholars, is harmful for a variety of reasons. According to (Grossjean, 1982 & Sert, 2005), students are not pushed to maximize the use of available linguistic resources for meaning-making in target language if mother-tongue use is an option in the classroom.

Disproportionate use of mother-tongue has been observed in Ethiopian EFL classrooms, notably in grade nine, where English is started to be given as a medium of instruction. It has been said before that overuse of MT in situations where English is meant to be the only medium of instruction, has an impact on the target language's teaching and learning process. As far as the main objective of English language teaching is to foster the target language, overuse of mother-tongue results in inefficiency in learning the target language. Based on the researcher's observation, mother tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English classroom is a prevailing fact in Ethiopian context. Because little is known about this issue, and few studies have been done on it, the researcher needs to conduct a study on teachers' and students' extent of mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English classroom.

The following discussion elucidates the research gap identified in previous studies, as well as the differences between them and the present research. The local researchers (Kenenissa, 2003 & Jemal,



2012) had already conducted related studies but the following research gap has been identified to be filled in this research. Kenenisa (2003) studied "Using L1 in the EFL Classroom: The Case of the Oromo Language with Particular Reference to Adama Teachers College." He focused on, the usage of L1 (in this case, Afan Oromo) in the English classroom by students and teachers, as well as their attitudes on utilizing L1 at the college level. Different to that, this study focuses on the extent of mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English classroom. Jemal (2012), on the other hand, investigated "Exploring the Use of First Language in EFL Classrooms: Focus on Jimma Teachers College." In terms of L1 needs, the survey found that first-year students have the highest, second-year students have the middle, and third-year students have the lowest need to use L1. The researcher came to the conclusion that the amount of L1 students like to use is a clear sign of their weak L2 proficiency; therefore one can simply estimate their L2 skill level. As L2 experience or duration of stay in college increased, students' L1 preferred amount reduced. However, this study only focused on the extent of teachers' and students' use of mother-tongue in English classroom.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent of teachers' and students' mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

EXTENT OF MOTHER-TONGUE USE IN EFL CLASSROOM

There is no universal standard to measure how much mother-tongue is proportional in EFL classroom. Stern (1992) claims that it would be advisable to allocate some time in which MT is used in order that questions can be asked, meanings can be verified, uncertainties can be clear and explanations can be given which may not be possible to the students through the use of target language. According to some scholars, it should not be overused which will gradually affect the target language meant to be learnt. For example, excessive use of mother tongue is likely to result in some or all of the following (Atkinson, 1987).

1. The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not 'really' understood any item of lesson until it has been translated.
2. The teacher and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of forms and meanings and, as a result, oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation.
3. Students speak to the teacher in the MT even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean in the TL.
4. Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom, it is essential that they use only English (p. 246).

Consequently, the amount of mother-tongue in EFL classroom should not exceed its limit to be appropriate for target language learning. However, the notions of optimal use of mother-tongue in the classroom may theoretically sound applicable, but



are not so easy to apply in classroom practice, especially in the EFL classroom, where, in many cases, the teacher can speak the students' native language (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002).

Achieving optimal levels of mother-tongue is particularly important where the teacher is usually the only better speaker and opportunities for using the target language. To achieve the optimal levels, students need to be encouraged to try to increase the range and quantity of their communicative uses of English when they work in groups because they already use L1 in group discussion, clarification of meaning, explanations, etc. But, in optimal position, L1 is used in the way to enhance students' target language (English) learning.

If the optimal amount of L1 is provided, then a guided and managed amount of TL input will be delivered that may facilitate target language learning. (Krashen, 1985) in his Input Hypothesis mentions that learners acquire the target language if the input is made sufficient and comprehensible by appropriate modification. Richards & Rogers (2001: 124-130) define comprehensible input as language directed to the learner that contains some new elements in it.

What exactly constitutes the appropriate mixture of L1 and L2 has not been well investigated, according to (Stern, 1992 & Turnbull, 2001). In this regard, more explorations need to be done to address this issue. Atkinson (1987) suggests, "At early levels a ratio of about 5% native language to about 95% target language may be more profitable." (Turnbull, 2000) believes that EFL teachers who use the mother tongue more than 75% of their time using actual classroom discourse risk depriving the learners

of useful language input. Therefore, he called for maximum target language use by the teachers. (Macaro, 2011) on his part, suggests that teachers' should use 80% of lesson time in target language.

In general, though it is very difficult to quantify the possible amount of mother-tongue required for effective target language learning, it seems that it would be at least important to be aware of the fact that mother-tongue can be used systematically with varying intensities for students ranging from early levels to the more advanced ones.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive case study design was as (Gall & Borg, 2003) describe this design as the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context, and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon (p. 436). A descriptive case study design is a design of inquiry found in many fields in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, a program, an event, activity, process, or individuals, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Yin, 2009). Hence in this study, the case under investigation is the extent of mother-tongue use in English classroom.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The study was carried out at Adama Secondary School found in Oromia Regional State of Ethiopian. The participants were grade nine teachers and students, who were using English as a medium of instruction. The rationale behind conducting a



research in this setting was that the researcher observed inappropriate use of mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) in English classroom.

SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

Eight (8) English language teachers and One hundred twenty (120) students were selected based on convenient and simple random sampling techniques respectively. The researcher used convenient sampling for teachers since some teachers were unwilling to be observed. Because of that, the researcher chose the ones who were willing to be observed. There are various practical conditions for adopting convenient sampling, according to Dornyei (2007), such as willingness, easy accessibility, closeness, and availability at a specific time. The rationale behind using simple random sampling for students is that as (Maree, 2007, p. 79) says random sampling is the process used to select a portion of the population for the study, which used to determine the type and number of respondents who will be included in the study.

INSTRUMENT OF DATA COLLECTION

Non-participant observation method was used to collect data. The observation was also supported by audio-recording. The observer's function is absolutely professional in this scenario, as he is only concerned with capturing actions of teachers' and students' use of mother-tongue in order to ensure data reliability and validity. Because the observer is not a participant in the observation, the participants' views and opinions are not influenced or directed by the observer.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the result, the observed and recorded data transcript was quantitatively transformed into numbers to know the extent of mother-tongue use in English classroom. Hence, the total number of English, Amharic and Afan Oromo words uttered during the sixteen lesson observations in eight sections (twice each) were counted using word and time proportion as a unit of measurement and converted into percentages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TEACHERS' EXTENT OF MOTHER-TONGUE USE IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM

This section presents the findings of teachers' extent of mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English classroom. The data from classroom observation and audio-recoding was examined to determine the proportion of mother-tongue and target language use in the observed classrooms. Eight teachers were observed and recorded sixteen (16) lessons for a total of 636 minutes. In Ethiopian secondary schools, the traditional class period in high school is 40 minutes, therefore the researcher could have recorded 16 lessons in 640 minutes, but 4 minutes were wasted because classes started late and teachers left early. The time proportions of these words were then identified in their respective languages. Finally, the words were counted into numbers to determine their percentage of the entire recording time in the lesson.

**Table 1: Presentation of teachers' extent of mother-tongue use**

Lesson (min)	Teachers	English words		Amharic words		Afan Oromo words		Total	
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
1-2 (87)	T1	2,562	80%	517	15%	165	5%	3,244	100%
1-2 (85)	T2	2,459	85%	345	10%	153	5%	2,957	100%
1-2 (83)	T3	2,085	91%	173	6%	62	3%	2,320	100%
1-2 (83)	T4	1,833	84%	330	11%	151	5%	2,314	100%
1-2 (78)	T5	1,805	91%	182	6%	73	3%	2,060	100%
1-2 (73)	T6	1,350	93%	105	3%	123	4%	1,578	100%
1-2 (75)	T7	1,496	93%	53	3%	89	4%	1,638	100%
1-2 (72)	T8	1,395	94%	120	4%	42	2%	1,557	100%
Total		14,985	89%	1,825	7%	858	4%	17,668	100%

Key: T1- Teacher one, T2- Teacher two, T3- Teacher three, T4 –Teacher four T5-Teacher five, T6 Teacher six, T7-Teacher seven, T8-Teacher eight

The table above displays the number of words used by teachers in three languages (English, Amharic and Afan Oromo) during the observation and recording period. Within 636 minutes, teachers uttered a total of 17,668 words, as depicted in the table above. Teachers spoke 14,985 English words out of the total number of words spoken, counting for 89% of the whole class time. Teachers pronounced 1,825 Amharic words, counting for 7% of total class time, and 858 Afan Oromo words, accounting for 4% of class time. Hence, teachers

were observed using their mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) for 11% of class time. The finding implied that teachers' extent of mother-tongue use in English classroom is considered optimal based on (Macaro's, 2011) standard that teachers' should use 80% of lesson time in target language. The proportion of time spent on each of the three languages is calculated and showed in the following bar graph:

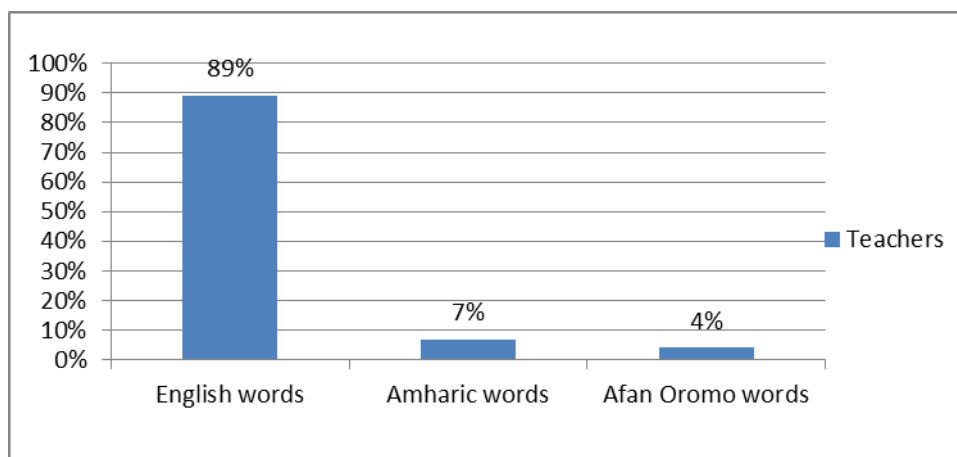


Figure 1: A bar graph showing the time proportion of words used per languages

STUDENTS' EXTENT OF MOTHER-TONGUE USE IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM

This section presents the findings of students' extent of mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English classroom. The data from classroom observation and audio-recording was examined to determine the proportion of mother-tongue and target language use in the observed classrooms. Eight groups of students were observed and recorded sixteen (16) lessons for a total of 172 minutes. The sum of all English, Amharic and Afan Oromo words used by eight groups of students was provided in the table below, along with the time proportion they took.

Table 2: Presentation of students' extent of mother-tongue use

Lesson (min)	Students	English words		Amharic words		Afan Oromo words		Total	
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
1-2 (17)	SS1	251	59%	180	41%	0	0%	431	100%
1-2 (27)	SS2	615	56%	174	19%	254	26%	1,043	100%
1-2 (18)	SS3	282	50%	114	28%	99	22%	495	100%
1-2 (26)	SS4	745	73%	166	27%	0	0%	911	100%
1-2 (22)	SS5	353	41%	160	27%	172	32%	685	100%
1-2 (25)	SS6	452	40%	272	32%	172	28%	896	100%
1-2 (15)	SS7	195	53%	105	27%	71	20%	371	100%
1-2 (22)	SS8	342	50%	286	41%	40	9%	668	100%
Total		3,235	53%	1,457	30%	808	17%	5,500	100%

Key: SS1- Group one, SS2- Group two, SS3- Group three, SS4- Group four, SS5-Group five, SS6-Group six, SS7- Group seven, SS8-Group eight

Eight groups of students used a total of 5,500 words, of which 3,235 were spoken in English, counting for 53% of the total discussion time; students used 1,457 Amharic words, counting for 30% of the total discussion time; they also used 808 Afan Oromo words counting for 17% of the total discussion time. Hence, students' mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) use in English stands for 47% of total discussion time they had. This result implied that students' use of mother-tongue in English classroom is well beyond what is considered optimal by (Atkinson's, 1987) standard that a ratio of about 5% native language to about 95% target language may be more profitable. The proportion of time spent on each of the three languages is calculated and showed in the following bar graph.

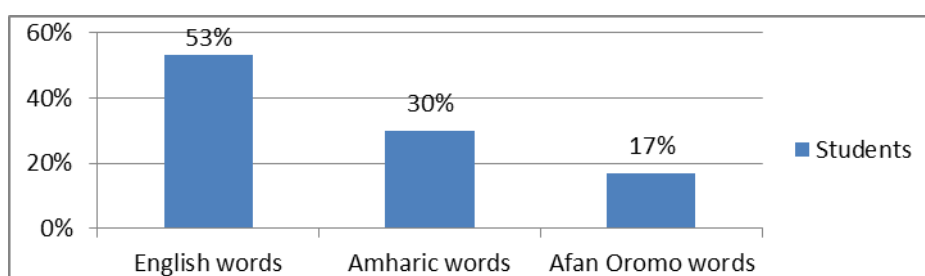


Figure 2: A bar graph showing number of words students used per languages

SUMMARY OF THE NUMBER OF WORDS USED BY THE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The following bar graph gives the comparison of teachers' and students' mother-tongue (Amharic and Afan Oromo) use in target language (English) classroom.

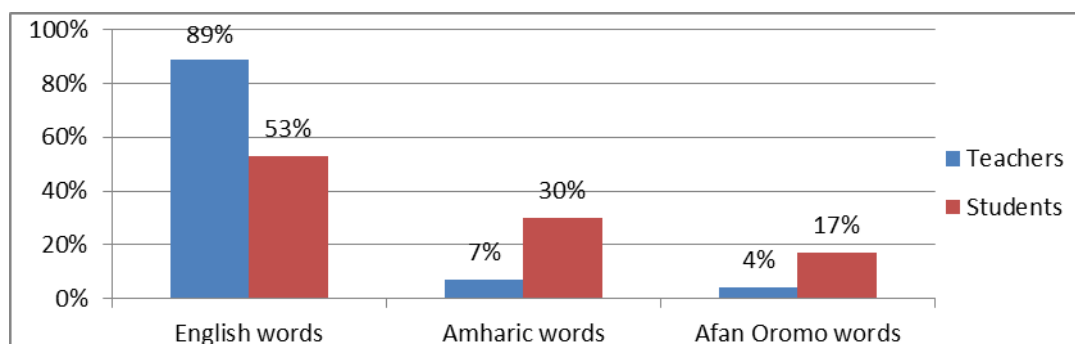


Figure 3: A bar graph showing the number of words used by teachers and students

Students use mother-tongue 47%, as indicated in the bar graph above as compared to teachers 11%. The classroom observation also revealed that both teachers and students use Amharic more than Afan Oromo in English classroom as it stands teachers used 7% Amharic and 4% Afan Oromo while students use 30% Amharic and 17% Afan Oromo.

Therefore, the result revealed that students use mother-tongue (Amharic and/or Afan Oromo) more frequently than teachers. Students' incompetence in target language was seen as major factor for students' overuse of mother-tongue in English classroom.



DISCUSSION

Teachers' lesson transcript revealed the number of words and minutes used between the target language and the mother-tongue. Teachers subsequently spent 11% of class time using Amharic or Afan Oromo. It was found that teachers did not overuse mother-tongue in the English classroom when the amount used was compared to the literature and relevant studies. For example, (Turnbull, 2000) believes that EFL teachers who use the mother-tongue more than 75% of their time using actual classroom discourse risk depriving the learners of useful language input. Therefore, he called for maximum target language use by the teachers. (Macaro, 2011) on his part, suggests that teachers' should use 80% of lesson time in target language. Similarly, Macaro (2011) limited the usage of L1 in English classrooms to 20%, which is consistent with the findings of this study. This finding is also compatible with several other researches, such as Wolfaardt's (2005), who suggests that utilizing English as a medium of instruction for 80% of the class time in secondary schools is reasonable.

In this study, students spent 47% of the class time using Amharic and/or Afan Oromo, their mother tongues. This finding indicated that students' usage of their mother tongue in the English classroom exceeds well beyond what is optimal according to many standards. In contrast to this study, other researchers discovered that students' mother-tongue usage was far lower than that reported in this study. The amount of mother-tongue usage varies depending on a variety of factors, including student proficiency, motivation, and classroom rules. For

instance, as to (Turnbull, 2000 & Calman & Daniel, 1998), mother-tongue should be used fewer than 25% of the class time in an EFL classroom. This is because if mother-tongue use in an English classroom is not maintained, students' target language acquisition may fail. To support this view, (Macaro, 2005) noted that optimal usage of mother-tongue entails making a judgment about the potential positive and negative impacts of it and attempting to use it to assist students in successfully acquiring the target language.

By several studies, the amount of time students spend speaking their mother-tongue in English classroom is proportional to their skill level. For example, Jemal's (2012) research found that first-year students have high L1 need, second-year students have medium L1 need, and third-year students have the least L1 need. The amount of L1 they prefer to use is a clear sign of their L2 proficiency. As students' L2 experience or duration of stay in college grew, so did their L1 preferred amount decline. He went on to say that the more L2 experience students had, the less L1 they claimed, and the less L2 experience they had, the more L1 they were found wanting. In Tang's (2002) research as well, there is a substantial relationship between students' proficiency and the amount of mother-tongue used in the classroom.

To address the issue of excessive use of mother-tongue in group work, teachers must first determine the goal of the group work. Using mother-tongue should not be an impediment for some activities, according to Cook (2001). In addition, employing mother-tongue in group work is justified by the



students' motivation and abilities (Macaro, 1997). If using TL is the goal, pair work may be a good option because it can be controlled, but group work is frequently done with mother tongue because there are more than two people involved and the group may become uncontrollable (Macaro, 1997).

When there is too much mother-tongue use, teachers may employ a variety of strategies and, for no apparent reason, overlook the importance of group/pair work in target language learning (Atkinson, 1987, 1993). Teachers should carefully balance the group/pair, mixing high- and low-level students, and monitoring them throughout the group/pair work to ensure that they use their mother-tongue to assist in the completion of a task, clarifying ambiguities, or discussing the goal of an activity in the TL if necessary. Due to the fact that students share the same MT, it is natural for them to use their first language when completing a task in pairs or in groups (Cook, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

Students in Ethiopian EFL classrooms start learning in English as a medium of instruction in Grade 9, which suggests a considerable decrease in the amount of time students are exposed to the target language (English) in their early years of education. The results of this investigation revealed that the students' English language competency was quite low. For that reason, students rely on their mother-tongue to enable them get over their challenge with the target language since their ability to cope with English as a medium of instruction is inadequate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher has provided the following recommendation after seeing the result of the study. Since students' overuses mother-tongue (Amharic and Afan Oromo) in English classroom, their teachers should help them minimize its use in English classroom. In order to do that, teachers should be well trained to have strategies for effectively managing of mother-tongue use to avoid its negative implications on the target language learning. Another recommendation the researcher would like to give is that teachers' should help students avoid anxiety, put students at easy to increase their confidence and motivation to use English. Using mother-tongue should be a consciously chosen option with a supportive role of effective teaching and help students develop their English language learning. Therefore, concerned body should think about the amount of English input in early years schooling, and making principled decisions about when the students should start using English as medium of instruction.

As far as my knowledge is concerned, in Ethiopian context, there is no written policy, curriculum or guideline regarding the use of mother-tongues where English is used as a medium of instruction. Since Ethiopia is a multilingual country, the influence of mother-tongue in English classroom is undeniable. Therefore, it is important for policy makers or curriculum developers to obtain teachers' and students' extent of mother-tongue use in English classes. Pre-service teachers did not receive adequate instructions and guidance on how to manage mother-tongue in English classroom. Therefore, guidance should be provided on how to ensure that mother-tongue should be used in the



way it does not interfere with the acquisition of the target language forms.

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