

Challenges and Opportunities while Using English as an Instructional Language: The case of TVET Regular Students

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Abstract

The importance of using English language as an instructional medium is unarguable not only because the students need the language for their overall academic success but also because the students' success is related with the demand of the globalized world. The overall purpose of the study is to examine the extent to which instructors of none English courses at St. May's University College make use of the instructional language. It also focuses on the extent to which students would like to see their instructors use English language during class time. The study adopted a survey methodology for data collection using closed ended questionnaires. The questionnaires were dispatched for 139 students and 32 instructors and analyzed. The study revealed that both students and instructors believed that English as a medium of instruction is vital. Students, however, considered it as a barrier to comprehend their lesson. Thus instructors usually use L1 although most students are skeptic whether L1 is to facilitate their understanding. Finally the paper makes some recommendations that might be useful to the teaching learning process

Introduction

The need to use English in all subjects involving the language as an instructional medium is vital not only because students need language competency for their overall academic success, but it is also important

because the effective use of English language highly determines the student's success and future career in a globalized world. It is also vital to stress that receiving the English language passively from one channel, usually from the teacher, could result in a major problem, as total deviation from the ultimate goal of learning and lack of personal concept formation.

Thus, maintaining the balance between an appropriate use of English and avoiding unnecessary confusion that could arise from its massive use, would be something that needs wisdom and care. In Maths and Science classes for instance, transferring concepts which are related to the subject matters is the primary concern, not teaching the English language. To this effect, investigating issues such as students' level of English language competence, their attitude towards the extent their teachers, as well as they, have, their understanding towards the real importance of using the English language as a medium of instruction, would be significant and useful.

Objective of the study

The extent to which instructors of none English courses at St. Mary's University College make use of English as an instructional language, would be the major area of concern in this study. In relation to this, the extent to which students would like to see their instructors use English language during class time would be examined. Instructors' attitude towards the impacts of using English language as a medium of instruction on their students' learning will also be considered. Investigation will also be made whether English language works as a facilitator or becomes a barrier for the effective understanding of concepts.

Significance of the Study

Instructors, who teach subjects different than the English language itself, will be using the language as a mere tool for teaching their subjects, and teaching the English language is not an end by itself in that case.

The way they use the English language in these instances, however could play either a positive or negative role in the overall academic success of their students, that may be achieved either in the courses they take or/and in their English language competence. That is why exists a need to investigate whether instructors who use the English language as instructional tool make use of it in a constructive or destructive way. This study wish also to give further insight for researchers who would like to explore the role of foreign language in teaching subjects other than the English language. It could also provoke researchers to investigate and suggest the appropriate level of the use of mother tongue and instructional language in a balanced way, so as to enforce effective learning in subjects different than the language itself.

Sampling and Data Source

Questionnaires designed for both students and instructors were used as instruments in order to collect data. From the regular program of departments of SSOM, Law, Accounting and Information Technology 139 students and 32 instructors teaching major courses in the departments were randomly selected. Questionnaires were analyzed, tabulated and interpreted in terms of percentages.

Literature Review

Why English as a Medium of Instruction?

According to the renowned educational linguist, Spolsky (1978), the final decision about whether English has to be used as an instructional medium or not is more political rather than pedagogical. This implies that educators have got quite a little space to effectively change the medium of the instructional language 'imposed' by policy makers. Yet Spolsky (1978) hadn't ruled out the importance of modifying and interpreting the characteristics of the language, in such a way that they could meet the

respective demands of their national curriculum as well as local demands. The implication here is that there is no a perfect way of using the English language, fully useful for an entire national educational setup.

Nevertheless, one can see multiple reasons which force nations to go for English as their medium of instruction, despite the fact that it is foreign to their culture. Jones and Oberst cited in Tamtom et. al. (2010) underscore that the global nature of the English language has made it the medium of communication in many countries. In turn, this encouraged a consistent reform of the language in order to meet the specific demands of nations. As it is well known, the need to be proficient in English is not just an option in the education system of Ethiopia. It is rather a matter of success or failure coming on the students' path. In other words, educational success is highly related to the learners' English language competence, as far as almost all the courses are being offered in English.

English Language and Academic Success

According to Teen (2009), there are scholars who uphold the opinion that using English as an instructional medium in countries where English is not the first language is significant to make them more competitive in the actual globalized world. However, others argue that the use of English language as an instructional medium in countries where the language is foreign foster students' career failure. And they consider the instructional process involving the mother tongue of learners, as a novel approach that could boost success in education process. For instance, Velosquz (2002) identifies the negative role of English to understand concepts of other major courses under the context where students' first language is not English. He further stresses that "English as a medium of instruction poses double difficulty for the students- that of learning and understanding English and learning and understanding science and mathematics concepts which are being taught" (Ibid, 2002).

Although the controversy as to which language, first or foreign, should be the major instructional medium in order to bring success in educational process is still there, scholars like Gueye (1993) stated that most third world countries consider English as an access key for science and technology, which calls for policy makers to map out priority issues useful to help students in succeed in their education and develop critical thinking while using the language.

This controversy is of course a huge issue requiring intensive research that should involve educators, policy makers as well as other stake holders. Nonetheless, it obviously gives clue regarding the magnitude of concern scholars have about problems associated with use of English language as a medium of instruction in the context where the native language of learners is another.

Problems Related to Using English as an Instructional Medium

The role played by foreign language(constructive or destructive) which is considered as a medium of instruction is not something to be overlooked as far as maintaining quality education is concerned. There is an obvious fact which we can easily witness in using the English language as an instructional medium in foreign language contexts. It highly determines the level of achievement a student could have in his/her education. Tamtam and et al (2010) citing Schutzenhoter stresses that, since students who are not very good in English will have problems reading books, journals and news papers helpful to their education, it would be vital to use the appropriate methodology of language teaching so as to help them curb their problems with this regard.

Especially, in a situation where proficiency in English is not an end by itself, the role played by the English language for the effectiveness of the teaching learning process would be such a relevant question worth investigating. That means, while using the English language as an

instructional medium for other courses, the issue whether concepts which are supposed to be transferred to the learners are effectively communicated or not would be a sensible question. It would be important to figure out what type of role the English language plays in helping students understand major courses offered in English.

Why Interaction in English for Non–English Classrooms?

The effort on the part of the students to discuss, debate and present their work in English will enhance their English language competence. That will not only enhance understanding the subject matter, it also helps them improve their skill in the very important foreign language that is vital to their overall all academic and social success. Thus, how much instructors allow discussion in English, which is a foreign language in our case, would be an important question which requires keen observation. Seliger quoted by Pica (1991:62) found that “learners who initiated and participated in interactions that require L2 in and out of the class room made more rapid progress and fewer L1 transfer errors than learners who interacted little”.

Instructors’ use of the English language would be quite vital in the case of the Ethiopian education context. According to Brown (2000), these types of contexts will highly depend on teacher’s input as the opportunity students get to communicate in English is basically limited. This actuality brings the need to communicate in English inside the classroom through channeling the teacher as a major source of English language input to a crucial level.

Students Understanding of the Subject Matter while Using English as a Medium of Instruction

How far do students understand the important contents of the course instructed in English while the language is foreign is also a wise question one could raise. Ur (1996:4) raises a very interesting idea in this regard.’

Learning may take place without conscious teaching; but teaching, as I understand it, is intended to result in personal learning for students, and is worthless if it doesn't do so. 'No matter how hard an instructor tries to pass important message in English ,if the English language competence of his students is lower than the level of language he uses in the class, understanding of the subject matter for the student will be difficult. As a result, we may conclude that this type of teaching is not effective as learning and concept formation barely takes place.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, 139 students and 32 instructors that are randomly selected from the various departments of St. Mary's University College - the regular division are involved in this study. Students' questionnaires which mainly are about their responses regarding the use of English for the effectiveness of their learning in general and data that shows their perspective regarding how much their instructors make use of the English language is presented and analyzed.

Instructors' questionnaires which are mainly designed to assess their attitude regarding issues such as the impacts of complete use of the English language during the instructional process and the way they evaluate the English language competence of their students is presented and analyzed.

Table 1: Students response regarding the importance of teacher's use of the English language as instructional medium

S.N	Items	Total number of students	Agree		Disagree	
			Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1.	My learning in English helps me understand the course I take.	139	131	94.3	8	5.7
2.	I'll understand the content of the subject matter well when the teacher completely uses English as an instructional medium	139	46	33	93	67
3.	In the classroom interactions such as asking questions & participation, the teacher is supposed to accept my idea even if I use Amharic.	139	98	70.5	41	29.5
4.	The student will be able to understand the major substance of the course in condition where the teacher uses English completely.	139	104	74.8	35	25.2
5.	It is better if teachers encourage their students to use English completely.	139	124	89.2	15	10.8

The above table has five items which are mainly intended to gather information related to student's agreement or disagreement regarding the importance of teacher's use of the English language as instructional medium. As can be seen in the table, 139 students filled up the questionnaire. Among them, the overwhelming majority, (94.3%) expressed that their learning in English is helpful to understand the course they take. However, the majority respondents, 67 % of them do not agree with the idea that a teacher who makes complete use of the English language throughout the instructional

process could help them understand the subject matter at hand effectively. In other words, these respondents do not consider instructor's complete use of the English language as important opportunity that can help them understand the subject matter more.

Apparently, the majority of the students (70.5%) indicate that their teachers should appreciate their enquiries and give appropriate responses even if the questions are asked in Amharic. Asked if they can understand the major substance of the subject matter in a situation where the teacher uses the English language only throughout the class time, the majority of the respondents (74.8%) expressed that it is not better to have a teacher of that sort. In this case, they pointed out, they fail to grasp the major substance of the subject matter. Accordingly, the majority respondents, (89.2%) expressed their preferences to have instructors who encourage their students to give responses in Amharic whenever the need arises.

Table 2: Students' Response regarding the extent to which they would like their teachers to make use of the English language as a medium of instruction (n=139)

S.N	Items	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Completely disagree	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1.	The teacher is suppose to use English only throughout the instructional phase	16	11.5	36	25.9	61	43.9	26	20.7
2.	The fact that the instructional medium is in English doesn't negatively affect my understanding of the subject matter	11	7.9	44	31.7	51	36.7	33	24
3.	The teacher's use of the Amharic language as an instructional medium help students understand the subject matter	9	6.5	25	18	54	38.9	51	32.6
4.	If the instructional medium is only English, students will fail to understand the subject matter well.	40	28.8	55	39.6	26	18.6	18	13
5.	My teacher gives the due credit to the English language competence of his students	10	7.2	26	18.7	45	32.4	58	41.7
6.	Student's understanding of the course at had should not be measure in terms of their English language competence.	23	16.6	15	10.8	35	25.2	66	47.4

The above table has six questions designed to assess students' level of agreement regarding the extent to which teachers have to make use of the English language as a medium of instruction in the instructional process. As we can see from the table, the majority (64%) of the respondents do not agree with the opinion that the teacher has to use English throughout the instructional process. The complete use of the English language during the instructional process according to this finding is not favored by the majority students. However, it would be important to mention at this point that only the minority respondents 'completely' disagree with the idea that their teacher should be using the English language throughout class time considering it as a threat for their better understanding of the subject matter at hand.

The next question is intended to get information concerning students' recommendation regarding to what extent their instructors should have to make use of the English language in the instructional process. Regarding the opinion of students on whether the use of English language hampers a good understanding of the subject matter at hand, the majority of the respondents (60.7) said they do not agree; that means they agree with the idea that complete use of English throughout the instructional phase negatively affects their understanding of the subject matter being taught.

Students were also asked whether they agree with the viewpoint that the reason why their instructor makes use of the Amharic language as an instructional medium is to help them understand the subject matter well. A response that doesn't seem to be consistent with the ones given to the rest of the questions in the same table comes out. Only 24.5% of the respondents agree with this idea. Although the majority believes in the importance of teacher's use of the Amharic language whenever the need arises, they seem to be rather skeptic about whether their teachers are using the Amharic language in the instructional process for the purpose of facilitating students understanding of the subject matter. In other words, they don't believe that

teachers use Amharic in class time so as to help their students understand the subject matter more.

Table 3: Students' Response regarding the frequency their teachers make use of the English language during the instructional process (n=139)

S.N	Items	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1.	The teacher encourages us to use the English language during the instructional process.	8	5.6	24	17.3	52	37.4	55	39.6
2.	It is difficult to understand what actually the teacher is saying when he speaks in English.	38	27.3	22	15.8	60	43.2	19	13.7
3.	The expressions and instructions the teacher uses during exam are too difficult to be understood.	18	13.0	34	24.5	59	42.5	18	13.0
4.	The teacher encourages us while presenting activities such as assignments and presentations in English.	13	9.4	6	4.3	23	16.6	97	69.8
5.	The teacher put my English language competence into confederation while giving feed back for written exam.	23	16.5	32	23.0	34	24.5	50	36.0

The questions in this table are mainly intended to draw information from students regarding the frequency their teachers make use of English in various segments of the instructional process. The first item in the table asks

how often the teachers encourage students to use the English language during the instructional process. Among the 139 respondents for this question, only 32% respondents indicated that their instructor usually and sometimes encourage them to use the English in the instructional process. However, the majority of the respondents (37.4%) and (39.6%) of them labeled that their teachers encourages them to use English rarely and never respectively.

The second item in the table is targeted to get information regarding to what extent students understand their teachers when they make use of the English language in the course of the instruction. The majority responded 'usually' and 'sometimes'; 43.2% and 13.7% respectively fail to effectively understand what the teachers are actually saying when they use English consistently. A related question has been asked in the third row of the table. The response we have in this section seems to be different from the information we get in the second question of the same table. The majority, above 55%, indicated that instructions and expressions which are given during exam time appear to be too difficult to be understood. At this level, it would be important to note that only 18% of the respondents 'usually' find these instructions to be easy to comprehend.

The fourth question in the box invites students to respond to the question related to the frequency their instructors encourage them to use the English language while doing their assignment or present in front of their friends. Only 19% stated that their instructors encourage them in this regard while the rest rate instructors' encouragement to be very limited. Nevertheless, the majority, 69.8%, surprisingly said that their instructors never encourage them to use English while they make presentations or work on their assignments.

The response students have to the question how often their instructors correct their English while providing feedback clearly consolidates the question on the 4th row. Still the majority of the respondents, more than 60%, underlined

that teacher's role in this regard is quite insignificant. Among these respondents, 36% of them say that their teachers never consider their English while providing them feedback.

Table 4: Teachers Attitude towards the Use of English in the Classroom
Question

Attitude items	%	%	Total
Using English as a medium of instruction is important	87	13	100
My students understand their subject well if they use English throughout the instructional phase	19.2	81.8	100
I mind if students use Amharic during class discussion	39.4	60.6	100
Students should be encouraged to use English in their classroom interaction	100	0	100

The above table has five questions designed to assess the teachers attitude about the importance of using English languages as a medium of instruction .As the table indicates, the great majority of the teachers (87%) believe that using English as a medium of instruction is important. But about the same number of respondents (81.8%) believe that their students do not understand their subject well if they use English throughout the instructional phase. This shows that teachers are not confident enough about the language ability of their students.

When we move to the 3rd item in the table, only 39.4% of the teacher said they do mind if students use Amharic during class discussion; that means the majority of the respondents (60.6%) do not mind if the class interaction is in Amharic. Thus, teachers seem to be flexible about using English as instructional medium. However, in the last item all teachers believe that students should be encouraged to use English in their classroom interaction.

Table 5: Instructors' response regarding the importance of teacher's use of the English language as instructional medium

S.N	Items	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>		<i>Disagree</i>		<i>No Opinion</i>		<i>Agree</i>		<i>Strongly Agree</i>	
		<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
1	A teacher should use the medium of instruction for the subject throughout the period.	5	15.2	6	8.2	2	6.1	16	48.6	4	12.1
2	My subject is not much influenced by the use of English as an instructional medium.	8	24.2	14	42.4	3	9.1	5	15.2	3	9.1
3	My students will understand the subject matter better if I use Amharic as inst medium discourages my students.	3	9.1	11	33.3	6	18.2	8	24.2	5	15.2
4	The use of English as an inst. Medium discourages my students.	9	27.3	11	33.3	8	24.2	4	2.1	1	3
5	I don't have to rate my students achievement based on their English competence.	-	-	8	24.2	6	18.2	10	30.3	9	27.3
6	I give value for the English language compliance of my students during evaluation.	7	21.2	10	30.3	6	18.2	8	24.2	2	6.1
7	Good command of English contributes a lot to the success of my students in the course I teach.	9	6.1	3	9.1	4	12.1	12	36.4	12	36.4
8	My students are encouraged more when there is more English than Amharic in the instructional process.	8	24.2	7	21.2	9	27.3	6	18.2	3	9.1

The above table has eight questions that are designed to gather information regarding teachers' level of agreement about the usage of English as a medium of instruction. As can be seen in the table above only

60% of the respondents are of the opinion that English should be strictly used as a medium of instruction. However, in the same table, 81% of the teachers believe their students have difficulty understanding the subject if English is used strictly as instructional media. There is also a disparity of responses on whether English is used strictly as instructional media. There is also a disparity of responses on whether the subjects instructors are teaching influenced by the use of English or not. On the other hand, teachers responded positively. In contrast, 24% of the teachers do not believe in the decisiveness of the English language in teaching their subjects.

About 42% of the teachers disagree that students understand the subjects they are teaching if Amharic is used as a medium of instruction. About the same number of teachers agreed on the idea that using Amharic in the instructional process helps students understand the subject better. 18% of the teachers were unable to respond either positively or negatively. This shows that teachers are divided on this issue. The majority of the teachers (57%) believe in not relying on the competence of their students during evaluation. What is contradictory here is that 72% of the teachers agree on the importance of good command of English to succeed in their courses they teach. But the same ability which they deem to be important is not given value by the majority of teachers.

Teachers (45%) also noted that using English more often during instruction, doesn't guarantee that students are encouraged. 27% hold the opposite view. However, 27% of the teachers were not able to say whether using English more often encourages or discourages their students. In General, the data obtained seems to be inconclusive. One cannot say whether using more English in the instruction is encouraging or discouraging for students to use the languages in class.

Table 6: Instructors' response regarding the frequency their teachers make use of the English language during the instructional process

S.N	Items	1	%	2	%	3	%	4	%
1	How often do you encourage your student to interact with you in English during instruction?	13	39.4	17	51.5	2	6.1	1	3.0
2	Do you find your students face difficulties understanding what you are saying in English your student	7	21.2	22	66.7	4	12.1	-	-
3	Fail to understand directions (instructions)	3	9.1	22	66.7	5	15.2	3	9.1
4	Students fail to understand important words in the course you give during test and exams	3	9.1	23	69.7	4	15.2	2	6.1
5	Do you consider the language of your examines while correcting essay type or other open ended questions?	2	6.1	8	24.2	8	24.2	15	45.5
6	Do you consider the language of your examines while correcting essay type or other open ended questions?	14	24.4	10	30.3	7	21.2	2	6.1

The above table has six questions that are designed to indicate how often the teachers agree about the usage of English language as a medium of instruction. As the table shows the majority of teachers (90%) encourage their students to use English although the majority of the teachers say their students fail to understand oral instructions, directions and important words in the course. The majority of the teachers (69%), however, responded that they do not arrange presentation tasks for their students. In contrast, 42% of the teachers always consider language ability while correcting students' essays. 30% said they do this sometimes. However, 69% of the teachers are against arranging presentation sessions for their students. We can conclude

that teachers feel concerned and try their best to encourage their students to use English.

Conclusions

As we can see from the findings in this study, there exists a common understanding among students and instructors that the use of English in courses which involve English as a medium of instruction is vitally important. However, the majority of the students have got a differed outlook towards the complete use of English language throughout the instructional phase. They consider this approach as something that creates barrier in the effective understanding of the courses at hand. Here we can deduce that the reason why the English language competence of most of the students does not meet the standard that is expected from their level has clearly impacted panic on their part when they come across instructors who continuously and without interruption use the English language as an instructional medium.

It is also discovered that almost equal number of teachers accept and refute the idea that students fail to understand the subject matter well if Amharic is involved in the instructional process. This shows that instructors don't have consensus regarding the impacts of involving Amharic side by side with the major instructional language, English, and that makes the issue at hand more open to studies and further investigations.

The most important information that we can perhaps extract from this study is that although students and teachers have general consensus regarding the use of the English language for the effective understanding of different courses, the degree to which the language should be used during the instructional process varies significantly. Accordingly, the findings reveal that instructors usually use L1 as an instructional medium while teaching although most students appear to be skeptic about whether their instructors are really using L1 for the sake of facilitating understanding.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- Additional language classes that enhance the English language skills of students should be set.
- Students should be able to discuss with their instructors regarding the way they should use the medium of instruction, English, in such a way that it could facilitate their understanding of the subject matter.
- There needs to be a consensus among the students and instructors regarding the benefits and disadvantages of using the learners' first language during the instructional process.
- Instructors should make use of simple English during instruction and also should encourage their students to interact with them despite the language deficiency students may face while trying to do so.
- Instructors should give due attention to the English language improvement of their students by encouraging them to present their work in the language and giving sensible and productive feedback that focuses on their English language skills.

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