

Subject Teachers' Perceptions towards the use of English as a Medium of Instruction to Improve Students' Language Proficiency

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Abstract: *Generally educationalists believe that the use of English by all other subject teachers will facilitate the learners to improve their listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills. Further, the subject teachers can coordinate with English teachers in improving the language proficiency of the students. To know the realities on this issue of strengthening English proficiency among the university students a study is conducted at Dilla University, Ethiopia. The participants of this study were the other subject teachers teaching major subjects English as the medium of instruction at college of Technology, College of Natural and Computational science, and College of Business and Economics. The data was collected through questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations.*

This study aimed to find out subject teachers' perception towards the use of English as a medium of instruction in their classes to improve their students English language skills. This research offered promising results on the perception of the subject teachers towards the use of English as the medium of instruction to improve their students' English language skills. The data shows that nearly 65% of teachers are practically contributing to improve English language and communication skills of their students. About 75% of the teachers believe that their cooperation with concerned English teachers would benefit for the students to improve their English language skills. More than 70% of teachers are helping the students by facilitating positive environment to use English language for the class room interaction and by providing emotional support.

Keywords: *English Language Proficiency, Subject Teachers' Perceptions, Medium of Instruction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Student proficiency in the English language is important in this era of communication as it is the language of scientific and technological papers. Phillipson (1992) indicated that English is used in less developed countries especially in government and education. He further emphasized and argued that influence of English is interrelated within the cultures at all levels. However, as it is indicted in David Crystal (1997), the global language scenario has been created with a fast speed. Number of people using English as a language of international communication has increased than the number of people using it for international communication. Further he says that when a language gains global status, it is more concerned with who the speakers are, rather than the number of speakers. Scholars, teachers, researchers and educationalists of English subject are striving their level best to upgrade English skills among the university students. English language teaching also has undergone several changes from Grammar-translation method to Communicative language teaching approach to accommodate the needs of the stake holders.

A comfortable and attractive classroom is an environment which will be able to stimulate learning (Evans, S. (2002). Walberg (1991) mentioned that a conducive environment is always vital and effective for learning. Once the teachers facilitate such conducive environment to use English in their classes, students can acquire communicative abilities besides their knowledge in their respective fields of study. In addition, the presentable physical environment will strengthen the role of promoting students' achievement (ibid). Against this background, the focus of the research is to assess the perception of other subject teachers' towards using English as a medium of instruction in their classes to improve their students' English language skills.

In the world of globalization era, English has increasingly become the medium in every domain of communication. In Ethiopia for example, beginning from grade five onwards in Addis Ababa,

SNNPR and from grade nine onwards in all high schools, colleges and universities English is used as a medium of instruction. This shows that teachers in Ethiopia should be communicatively competent enough in the English language to effectively teach their subjects in the classroom. In fact, through teaching and learning process, teachers use English as a medium of communication with students in their subjects at Junior secondary, high schools and universities. However, most of the time, teachers pay attention to students' understanding and acquisition of some knowledge from their subjects rather than their use of English as a communication tool in their subjects. This may be one factor for the students' failure to develop their language competence.

In Ethiopia, of course, it is true that students learn English as a separate subject. But it is not enough for their progress in their language competence. On the other hand, they do not have the opportunity to communicate in English in their own community. English is not used for day-to-day activities in the society. However, students learn English indirectly through other subjects, which are taught in English.

The main objective of this study is to assess the perception of subject teachers towards using English as a medium of instruction in their classes to improve their students' English language skills. Accordingly, the study will seek answers to the following basic questions:

- i. What is the perception of subject teachers towards using English as the medium of instruction in their classes to improve their students' English skills?
- ii. How much do the subject teachers think over their students' problems in using English for the exchange of subject information / skills in other subject classes?
- iii. Are the subject teachers trying to improve their students' communication skills by creating conducive environment to help students to practice English language in other subject classes?
- iv. Are the subject teachers trying to maintain the idea of using English as the medium of instruction by facilitating ambience conducive to practice English language in other subject classes?

The results of this study will give some information for teachers and university management bodies so that the university management may arrange continuous training for the staff (subject teachers) or teachers themselves may update themselves. If teachers consider and give more attention in using English in various subjects, students will be able to develop their language skills. The use of English by all other subject teachers will facilitate the learners to improve their listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills. Further, subject teachers can coordinate with English teachers in improving the language proficiency of the students. In addition, it may give some clues to one who wants to study on same problem. On the other hand, it will initiate the university administrators to attempt supervision in teaching and learning process on this issue and in other subjects to help them for their effective communication in English.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

English is considered to be the lingua franca as the most widespread language in the world. "English is far by the most widely used language of wider communication in the world" (Conrad, 1996, p. 16 in S. Seçil 2001). While talking about the spread of English, the first thing that should be mentioned is the extent that English is widespread. Statistics on the use of English as provided in the Cambridge Encyclopedia estimates that English is official or semi-official language in over 60 countries (Crystal, 1987). "It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports, and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising" (Crystal, 1987).

There has been a lot of research done in the area of English language use as the medium of instruction in classrooms by many researchers and language teachers. Most of this research has studied teachers' opinions about the use of English / native language in the classroom or the influence of that usage. There have not been many studies exploring teachers' perceptions towards using English as a medium of instruction to improve students' English language skills. Education in Hong Kong is a good example to understand the effects of English medium instruction on education quality. The history of English as the language of education in Hong Kong is informative and interesting while discussing English medium instruction programs. At the British colonial time, a British inspector of schools, Edmund Burney (Evans, 2000) recommended that education language should shift from English to local languages in Hong Kong and Hong Kong government supported that Chinese should be the

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medium of instruction in all government schools (Evans, 2000). Between 1840s and 1970s government's educational policy was a mixed mode (Flowerdew, Li & Miller, 1998).

However, as mentioned in the Evans' (2000) article, although the colonial government supported the idea that native language should be the teaching language, Chinese government failed in maintaining a stable language policy because parents wanted their children to be educated in English (Flowerdew, Li & Miller, 1998; Evans, 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of universities increased because of increased demand for professionals in the economy and "Of the six universities, four are officially English medium and two allow instruction in either English or Chinese (Although even when lectures and tutorials are in Chinese, the textbooks are invariably in English)" (Flowerdew, Li & Miller, 1998, p. 206). Besides, there different opinions on the teaching language in Hong Kong's schools such as the ones who support the use of Chinese as a medium of instruction and the ones who believe the English medium of instruction should be maintained.

According to the education policy of Ethiopia, English is offered as a subject starting from grade one. However, at the same time, there was the problem between teaching and learning in English. In this regard, Tekeste Negash (1990) states that the overwhelming majority of secondary school teachers stated that using the English language as a medium of instruction created great difficulties both for themselves as well as for their students. The English language proficiency of both teachers and students is so low that Amharic is naturally used as the de facto language of instruction.' The national language policy appears to have been generally formulated in Ethiopia by foreigners (Brown et al., 1976, Lapiso 1991). Refining on the curriculum of Menelick II School, Daniel Abera has quoted, Lapiso (1991) who opines that the students didn't have national policy and program by which they can learn about the languages, history and culture of their country. From this situation, this idea that equates modern education with learning a foreign language became the national education program and the Ethiopian people take it for granted as a correct belief.'

In teaching and learning process, for students' language competence, not only are English teachers responsible but other subject teachers are too. In this regard, Tiruneh.S (1998) states that the students' ability in speaking and writing and the level expected of them in their subject do not tally. Though, other subject teachers were aware of their subjects' deficiencies, they hardly showed effect in promoting their language skills. Further he recommended that other subject teachers need to be made aware of the additional responsibilities for promoting their students' language competence and, thus work in collaboration with language teachers in this regard. In fact, other subject teachers have supporting role for developing students' language competence. In this sense, they will have the additional responsibilities. The first responsibility of the teachers is to revive motivation of their students. In this regard, Julia, M.D. (1996) quotes that the primary responsibility of the teacher is to promote motivation. Without motivation, students will fail in their attempt to bridge the gap between the manipulation and the communication of the subject and their hopes of speaking in English fluently will never be realized.

Another responsibility of the teachers is to use the language beyond the students' knowledge at least by one level. They should teach their subjects by using a clear and understandable language, because every lesson related is language. With regard to this, Wringe (1995) states that certain things are more closely connected with language – why certain expression is used, what the speaker intends to be understood but does not actually say and so on may also best be dealt with by the subject teachers. Above all, whenever teachers teach their respective subjects, they should encourage their students to speak in English. The learners are to be prompted to speak in English during classroom interaction.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subject teachers who are currently engaged in the teaching and learning in the second and third year at Dilla University are involved in this study. They are randomly chosen to participate in the study. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative method was used for closed ended questionnaires whereas qualitative method was used to strengthen data which was collected through semi-structured interview and classroom observation. Based on the needs of the study and availability of subject teachers, the number of respondents is varied for questionnaires and interviews / classroom observation. With this regard, 68 subject teachers were selected by using simple random sampling technique to fill questionnaire. Six teachers are selected for the purpose of

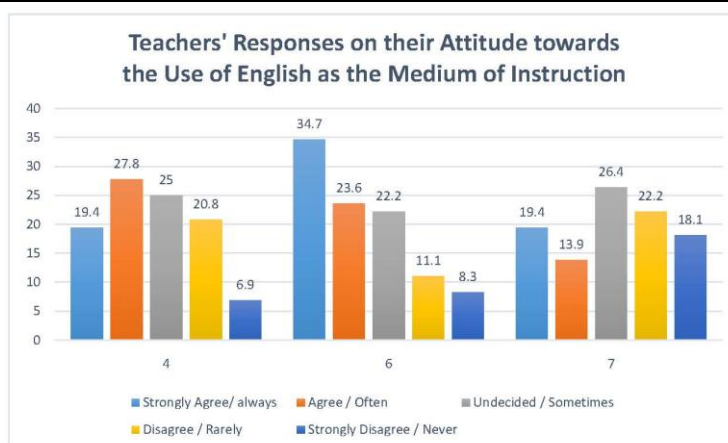
interview and another six teachers are chosen for the classroom observation using purposive sampling technique.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part lays out the results from the questionnaire, dealing with both closed-ended and open-ended questions, as well as presents the emerging themes from the interviews and classroom observation.

Table1. Subject teachers’ perception towards the use of English as the medium of instruction

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. Once the learners are good at English, they’ll be good in all subjects.	19.4	27.8	25	20.8	6.9
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
6. How frequently do you assume that your students understand the subject that you teach in English?	34.7	23.6	22.2	11.1	8.3
7. How frequently do you use students’ mother tongue (L1) in the teaching of your subject?	19.4	13.9	26.4	22.2	18.1



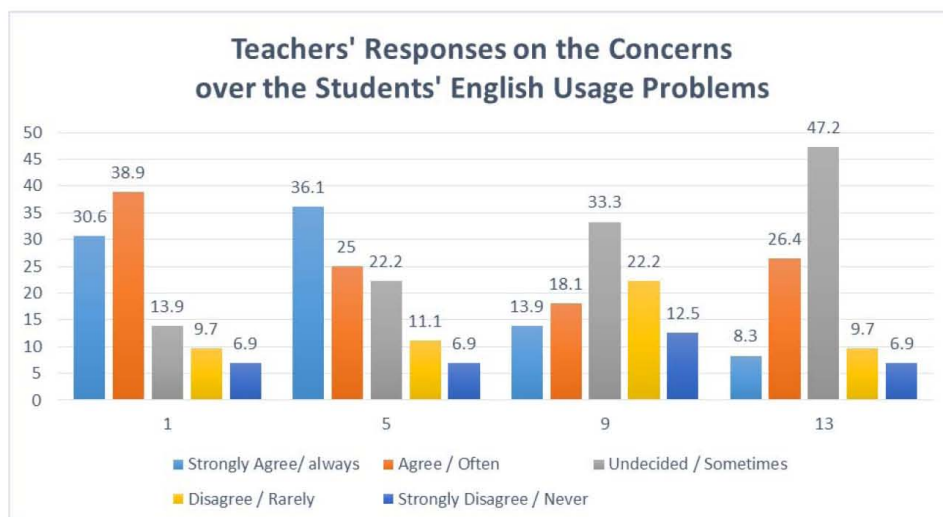
The data in the above chart shows the perception of teachers in using English as the medium of instruction. Nearly half of the teachers agree that English language skills shall help the learners to improve their subject knowledge, whereas 26 % of the teachers don’t agree this aspect. Data from interview also supports this. More specifically one interviewee stated that “*If English is used in subject classes, students will benefit a lot. The reason is that all the reference books, lecture notes, class or home take assignments or exams are in English. Besides, students will also work in English in different organizations after they graduate.*”

About 80% of the teachers believe that the students are interested and capable of understanding the lessons with English as the medium of instruction. From this data, it is evident that most of the teachers know that the learners can understand the subject with English as the medium of instruction.

Table2. Subject teachers’ responses on the concerns over the students English usage problems

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Subject teachers also have English teaching potential to some extent.	30.6	38.9	13.9	9.7	6.9
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
5. How frequently do you think about your students’ English language when you teach your subject?	36.1	25	22.2	11.1	6.9
9. How frequently do you correct your students’ errors of pronunciation / grammar / spelling?	13.9	18.1	33.3	22.2	12.5
13. My students can speak correct English but fear of what others would say / think about them.	8.3	26.4	47.2	9.7	6.9

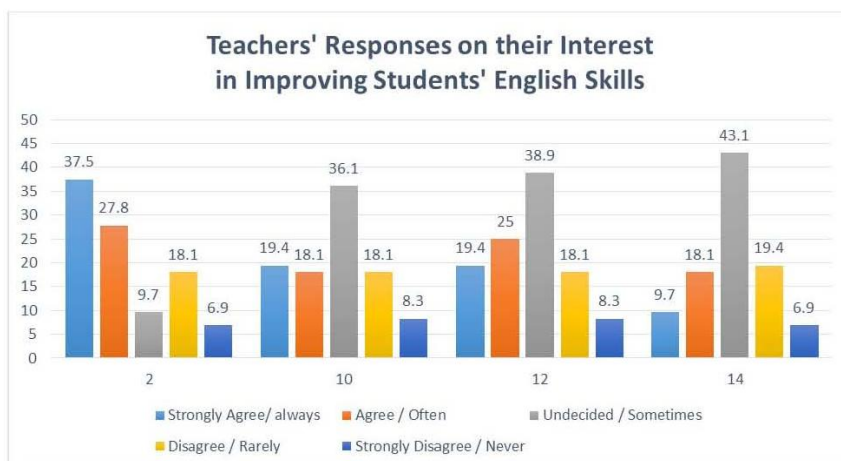
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The data in the above chart shows the concern of teachers over the students' problems in using English for the classroom interaction. Above 80% of the subject teachers expressed that they also can contribute for the students' English language issues in their classes. Further, the same number of teachers also felt that they are also thinking of about students' English language skills in their classes. It is also understood that 65% of the teachers are also correcting students' errors of pronunciation, grammar and spelling. Nearly 80% of the subject teachers shared that their students can express their subject ideas in English, but due to classroom dynamics, they are not using. From these thoughts, it is understood that subject teachers are capable, concerned and are helping students to overcome their problems in using English for the classroom interaction.

Table3. Teachers responses on their interest in improving students' English skills.

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. Cooperation between subject teachers and English teachers helps the language development of the students	37.5	27.8	9.7	18.1	6.9
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
10. How frequently do you encourage your students to improve their English skills?	19.4	18.1	36.1	18.1	8.3
12. My students can write grammatically correct and meaningful sentences in classes / assignments / exams	6.9	25	38.9	18.1	8.3
14. My students can speak well to convey their subject	9.7	18.1	43.1	19.4	6.9



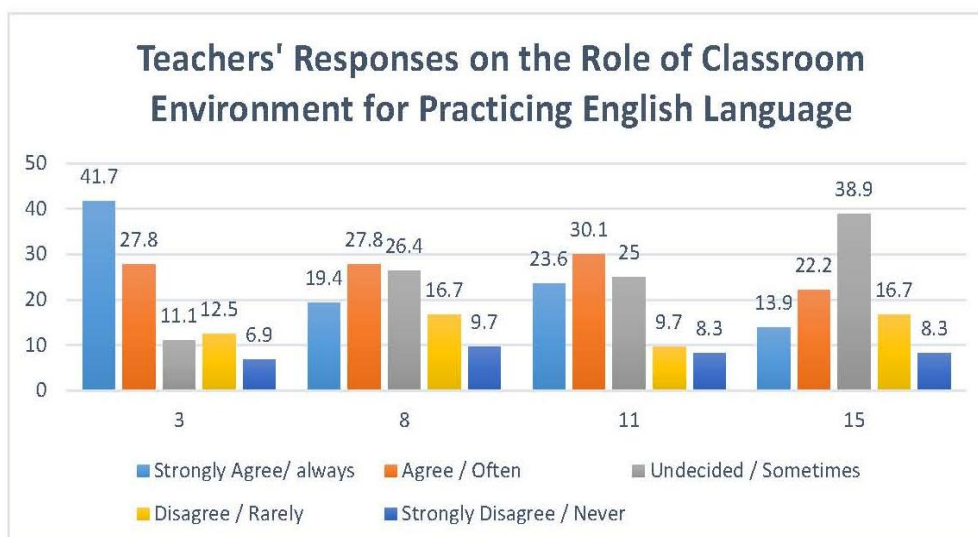
Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. Subject teachers are also responsible for the language development of their students	41.7	27.8	11.1	12.5	6.9
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
8. How frequently do you help your students to improve their English skills	19.4	27.8	26.4	16.7	9.7
11. My students can interpret information given in English and take running notes from lectures	23.6	30.1	25	9.7	8.3
15. My students can learn / use English words as per their communicative needs	13.9	22.2	38.9	16.7	8.3

The data in the above chart shows the interest of teachers in improving students' English language and Communication skills in their classes. About 75% of the teachers expressed that their cooperation with concerned English teachers will benefit for the students to improve their English language skills. With this regard, one of the interviewed teacher stated that most of subject teachers are willing to work in collaboration with EFL teachers so as to improve students' communicative skills. The other interviewed teacher also indicated, "I would be happy if you English teachers and we subject teachers conduct continuous seminars for coordination so that we can identify our students learning preferences, needs and communication problems and this may lead us to work hard to satisfy our students' needs which may lead us to design strategies to help them improve their English language skills." 75% of the teachers are taking the responsibility of improving English language skills and are encouraging the students to improve the proficiency.

Nearly 70% of the teachers expressed that their students are capable to write correct English with assignments, exercises and examinations. Same number of teachers also expressed that they also can present subject in the classroom interaction. From this information, it is clear that the teachers are trying to improve the students' capacities in using English for expressing the subject information in the classroom assignments, classroom activities and examinations.

Table 4. Teachers responses on the role of class room environment for Practicing English language

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. Subject teachers are also responsible for the language development of their students	41.7	27.8	11.1	12.5	6.9
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
9. How frequently do you help your students to improve their English skills	19.4	27.8	26.4	16.7	9.7
12. My students can interpret information given in English and take running notes from lectures	23.6	30.1	25	9.7	8.3
16. My students can learn / use English words as per their communicative needs	13.9	22.2	38.9	16.7	8.3



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The data in the above chart shows the role of teachers in facilitating positive environment to practice English language in the subject classes. Above 80% of the subject teachers feel that they are also responsible for the language development of their students. Furthermore, above 75% teachers are helping the students by facilitating positive environment to use English language for the class room interaction and by providing emotional support. Nearly 75% of the teachers expressed that the learners can interpret the subject information to prepare notes / material for further reference. Above 65% of the teachers believe that their learners are competent enough to learn / use English words as per their communicative needs. From these thoughts, it is evident that 75% of teachers are facilitating positive environment to practice English in their classes.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study has yielded reliable results with multiple data sources incorporating a survey questionnaire for teachers, classroom observations and in-depth interviews. Using the data from multiple sources allowed the researcher triangulation and thus benefited the overall results of this study. The following conclusions are resulted from this study:

- As seen in the study, a number of positive aspects are favoring the use of English as the medium of instruction in other subject classes. But there are a few observations that encourage the teachers to focus more on the use of English in other subject classes. The first implication of the study is that coordination among the teachers to improve and consolidate the students' linguistic proficiency.
- It has been found that though the perceptions of teachers are positive, some teachers are not using English as the medium of instruction. Psychological or emotional instinct to use L1 for effective teaching is observed. Use of English for general communication among the teachers may address such issues.
- The study also showed that there are problems with regard to sentence construction which are directly influencing students' abilities of speaking and writing. And nearly 65% of teachers are practically contributing to improve English language and communication skills by error analysis and error elimination.
- About 75% of the teachers expressed that their cooperation with concerned English teachers will benefit for the students to improve their English language skills. 75% of the teachers are taking the responsibility of improving English language skills and are encouraging the students to improve the proficiency.
- Majority (80%) of subject teachers feel that they are also responsible for the language development of their students. The finding shows that 75% of teachers are helping the students by facilitating positive environment to use English language for the class room interaction and by providing emotional support.

Based on the finding the following recommendations have been made.

- Since the solution of other problems regarding the improvement of English usage in teaching other subjects, English Language training Centre should be established to support students and teachers for additional assistance of human and material resources.
- The Study also suggested to give more importance for practice besides improving and consolidating English language skills. Students who wish to improve their English skills are to be provided with some materials / assistance for the purpose in language laboratory.
- Furthermore, in the process of effective contribution of other subject teachers for English language skills, special attention should be paid for teacher training. Markee (2001) puts forward that teachers can more easily change their values and help bring about deeper changes if they understand why there is the need to change (p. 120). Therefore, the most imperative and effective way to implement English as the medium of instruction is to provide in-service teachers with opportunities to retrain themselves in improving their language skills and in helping students with suitable materials by the experts of the field. Within this framework, it is crucial that teachers not be lectured about English skills in teacher training programs. Rather, such training programmes / workshops should be demonstrated how English skills can be sharpened by subject teachers. Moreover, in these programs, teachers should be provided with opportunities to gain some hands-on experience, along with confidence in using English language for their academic and social life.

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