

# **Mother Tongue Based (MTB) Classroom Instruction: *The Attitudes and Perceptions of School Community in Sidama Zone, Ethiopia***

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## **Abstract**

The main objective of the study is to assess the attitudes and perceptions of school community towards mother tongue based classroom instruction. The study was conducted in Sidama zone, particularly in three Woredas which one school was drawn from each. The approach employed to carry out the study was mixed one: quantitative and qualitative approach. The tools which were used to collect data are questionnaires and interview. The questionnaire was administered to the teachers and the students, and the interview was to the school parents in the target area. There were 70 students, 6 parents and 11 teachers who were taken by using cluster and random sampling. The results of the study showed that most parents and almost half of the sample students have negative attitude and perception towards using mother tongue as a medium of instruction. But, the teachers' attitude and perception can be rated as good. Moreover, the study revealed that there are challenges like shortages of reference materials and text books to be used in Sidama language; students might have problems in their future since the language is being used in their local environment only, and the students are experiencing serious writing problems in the texts they produce in the Sidama language.

**Key words:** Mother-tongue, Attitude, Perception, Classroom instruction

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Most African countries have embarked on new education policies and curriculum changes after UNESCO's 1990 World Conference on "Education For All". Yet, education success for the majority of children remains elusive. The measure was taken to provide quality education for citizens.

Although there are many factors involved in delivering quality basic education, language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom. Many developing countries are characterized by individual as well as societal multilingualism, yet continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called "submersion" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

Mother tongue-based bilingual programs use the learner's first language, known as the L1, to teach beginning reading and writing skills along with academic content. The second or foreign language, known as the L2, should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one. Bilingual models and practices vary as do their results, but what they have in common is their use of the mother tongue at least in the early years so that students can acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to understanding and participating in the classroom.

Though mother tongue based education has such roles, discussions of the role of the MT (mother tongues) are often controversial and polarized, full of misunderstandings and an unhealthy amount of guilt. The banning and the use of the MT have come and gone throughout history. However, Cook points out that 'most teaching methods since the 1880s have adopted the direct method avoidance of the L1' (2001: 2) and 'recent methods do not so much forbid the L1 as ignore its existence altogether.

According to Hovens (2003) and Walter and Dekker (2011), for a successful mother tongue based classroom instruction, the attitude of the school community towards it is very significant. However, the analytic report of EGRA, released by the USAID (2010) reveals that the mother tongue based classroom instruction in the current study area was not successful as it is compared with other areas in the nation. The result shows how the problem was very serious. In the report, the part which is specified by SNNP refers the sample areas taken from Sidama zone which the area of the current study. The Percentage of Children scoring zero on reading comprehension is 72.8% and 87.5% of Grade 3 children read less than 30 words per minute. In addition, the report revealed that 69.2% of the children could not read one word in Grade 2.

According to the researcher, since the students' result is extremely poor per the standard measurement, investigations should be carried out to identify the causes of the problem. Moreover, the research works conducted so far in the area haven't assessed the attitude and perception of the society, the learners and the teachers on the role of MT in education.

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the research is to assess the attitude and perception of the wider school community towards mother tongue based classroom instruction. Very specifically, the research attempts to:

- Identify parents' views and level of understanding towards mother tongue based classroom instruction.
- Assess the attitude of teachers and students towards using in mother tongue for classroom instructional purposes.
- Sort out the opportunities and challenges that the school community experiences and imply directions for future action.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

Since the issue of mother tongue based classroom instruction is somehow controversial and a discussion point across the country, it is paramount to study in depth to disclose the existing classroom reality. We know that our country is the home of diversified culture and more than eighty languages. Therefore, basically, this research helps the governmental and the non- governmental organizations which are engaged in training society about bilingual and multi-lingual education. Moreover, the results also serve as an input for designing training manuals, brushes, etc.

Very specifically, professionals who are working in the area of mother tongue education and curriculum designing are direct beneficiaries from the output of this research. In addition, it gives scientific direction to various school community members on the role of mother tongue for conducting classroom lessons so that they act accordingly to get maximum output from the teaching learning process. In other words, the benefit also extends up to improving the quality of education. Finally, this research paves away to other researchers to conduct further studies on the area.

### **1.4 Review of Literature**

The use of several Ethiopian Languages in primary education is a reflection of reforms in the geopolitical structures of the State after 1991 that divided Ethiopia into regional states. The borders of the regions were based upon the use of languages and the previous body of linguistic literature that attempted a categorisation of Ethiopian people according to language and geographical area. The rights of nationalities within the State to use languages for official purposes are enshrined in article 39 of the 1994 Constitution of Ethiopia. The use of Regional languages is a strong feature of federalism and an aspect of the representation of Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic groups of people (Cohen , 2006).

The Education and Training Policy (1994) promotes the use of regional and local languages for two stated reasons. The first reason is the claim that learning in the mother tongue has clear pedagogical advantages for the child, who feels comfortable and reassured by their ability to understand and analyse information in their own language. The second reason is the claim that the use of local languages in education accords with the rights of nationalities to self-expression that are enshrined in the Constitution of Ethiopia. The Ministry of Education, therefore, presents both pedagogical and ideological justifications for promoting the use of local languages for primary education (Cohen, 2000; 2006).

MTB education is instruction in a child's first language (L1), usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school. MTB instruction usually takes place exclusively in the language most familiar to children. In some cases, it may be provided as part of a bilingual or multilingual education program. In MTB programs, students have the opportunity to learn core concepts primarily in a familiar language, and, later, they learn the labels or vocabulary for those concepts in a new language. MTB education is especially beneficial in early childhood programs, preschool, and the early grades (up to grade 6), when children are learning to read and gaining new concepts (Benson, 2006). People have different vies concerning MTB classroom instructions. Some of them promote it, whereas, some of them are against by forwarding various justifications. However, recently, the dominant figure of the scholars and population is pro mother tongue based classroom instruction (Cummins, 1991; CSDE, 1991; Chumbow, 1990 and Fasold, 1984).

Scholars forward various benefits of conducting classes through MT. When curriculum content is presented in an unfamiliar language, an enormous amount of time must be spent first teaching children to understand, speak, read, and write L2 or a foreign language, something that is extremely difficult and wastes valuable years in the early grades that could be spent learning to read and learning academic concepts in L1. Moreover, children, who cannot understand the language used in the classroom, are unable to demonstrate what they know, ask questions, and participate. In contrast, providing children with an opportunity to learn in a language they understand—starting on the first day of school—confers significant advantages for the education system, teachers, parents, and students (Smits et al., 2008; Bender et al., 2005; Ball, 2010 and Walter and Dekker, 2011).

MTBE Impacts on Quality of Schooling in many ways. Well-documented empirical studies of mother tongue-based bilingual programs in developing countries began appearing in the 1970s and still form the basis of what is done in the field today. Among the impacts the most common are increasing classroom participation, positive affect and increased self-esteem (Richardson 2001), increasing parent participation (Cummins (2000) and increasing participation of girls Benson (2002).

However, implementing effective MTB education requires careful planning and commitment. According to Carole Benson (2004), factors to consider and steps to take to ensure your program is effective include the language model, language distribution, teacher recruitment and preparation, materials development and provision: parental support and education sector alignment.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The study basically assesses the attitude and perception of school communities towards mother tongue based classroom instruction. The design which the study employed was mixed approach. It combined both the qualitative and the quantitative approaches. In other words, the researcher has collected both qualitative and quantitative data.

### **2.2 Research Setting**

The present study was undertaken in Sidama Zone, in SNNPRS. The zone was selected by the researcher as mother tongue was being used as a medium of instruction in primary schools. The other justification was that since the area was near to the researchers' working site, it would minimize the challenge that the research might face to get the appropriate data.

### **2.3 Research population and Sampling Techniques**

The research was supposed to be conducted in the area where mother tongue is used as a medium of classroom instruction. Therefore, the researcher selected three schools randomly from three Woredas in Sidama Zone. Similarly, three Woredas are selected by clustering the 22 Woredas in the Zone in to three groups. Then, one school was selected randomly from each group. In addition, Hawassa college of Teacher Education was taken as a sample purposively.

From the schools' population, 10, 6 and 70 teachers, parents and students respectively were selected as research samples. The sampling technique employed was clustering and random sampling. Regarding teachers, from grade 1-4, two teachers from each grade level were selected and 4 teachers who were teaching in Hawassa Teacher Education College were selected. From each of the three schools, two parents, 6 in total, were selected as a sample. Finally, 20 students were selected randomly from each primary school and 10 students were selected in the same way from Hawassa College of Teacher Education.

### **2.4 Data Gathering Tools**

This research is supposed to be both qualitative and quantitative. Hence, tools which are appropriate for both approaches. A questionnaire was used to test students' attitude and perception towards Sidama language as medium of instruction. The questionnaire was slightly adapted from Taylor's Language Attitude Scale, Gardner Attitude/Motivation Scale and other scales. It is a 5-point Likert type which rates the attitude as "strongly agree", "agree", "undecided", "disagree", and "strongly disagree". Similarly, another questionnaire was designed to be administered to the Sidama language teachers. This questionnaire was designed by the researcher by considering various literatures in the area of mother tongue instruction. Before administering the questionnaire, it was piloted in a small population, and its reliability was computed: 0.82 which is rated as very good. The other tool, an interview, was designed in the same procedure with teachers' questionnaire and administered to the sample parents in the schools. The students' questionnaire and the parents' interview questions were translated in to the Sidama language to facilitate the informants' comprehension.

### **2.5 Data Gathering and Analysis Procedures**

The data was gathered from the stakeholders (school Communities) through the tools stated above. Specifically, first, the questionnaire was administered to the students and teachers who were involving in classrooms where Sidama language is a medium of instruction. Finally, an interview was undertaken to the school parents based on the questions developed by the researcher.

Concerning the analysis, priority was given to the quantitative data: questionnaire. The data from the students' questionnaire was analyzed first. Then, teachers' questionnaire scores followed. Then after, the qualitative data, the parents' interview, was analyzed and the information was triangulated with the questionnaire results. The quantitative data was analyzed in tables which are categorized under various titles in their relationship. The qualitative data was analyzed through discussion which is often termed as textual analysis.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

### **3.1 Students' Questionnaire**

First, the students were asked about their attitude towards the role of mother tongue in classroom. Accordingly,

the quantitative average data of the respondents disclosed that 39.2 (45.9%) respondents have a positive attitude towards the role since the sum of SA (strongly agree) and A (agree) results the indicated number. However, the addition of the two negative categories (Strongly Disagree and Disagree) shows that 25 (35.7%) students have a negative attitude towards the classroom role of the mother tongue. Likewise, 5.7 (8.1%) students were unable to decide on the role of mother tongue in classroom. From this, we can understand that though most of the students have a positive attitude towards the role of mother tongue, considerable number of the learners have a negative attitude towards the classroom role of their mother tongue.

Similarly, the questionnaire assessed the learners' perception towards the standard of mother tongue to meet the class room demands. The data reveals that 50.6 (72.2%) students agreed on the standard of the mother tongue to handle the issues in the classroom. On the contrary, 16.2 (23.1%) learners indicated that the language is not competent enough to meet the demands of the classroom. Also, 3(4.2%) respondents were unable to decide their position on the standard of the language in attaining the classroom needs. This implies that most of the students are convinced on the efficiency of the Sidama language to carry out the classroom activities. But, some students are not convinced in this regard.

In addition, quantitative data was collected on the learners' involvement and classroom preference in the case of mother tongue. It reveals that 40.6 (57.9%) students agreed that mother tongue is important to promote learners' involvement and improvement of results. Hence, they prefer they prefer their classes to be conducted in mother tongue. Nevertheless, 22.1 (31.5%) students reacted against to the use of mother tongue for the stated purposes. On the other hand, 8.4(12%) students were suspicious on the issue. Thus, we can say that even though most of the students prefer mother tongue as in improves the learners' involvement and results, some students are against the role. And, considerable number of learners are in confusion to decide on the issue.

Finally, the questionnaire assessed the attitude of the learners towards the availability of learning resources for mother tongue based classroom teaching and learning context. The quantitative data indicated only 24.5 (34.9%) students stated that there are enough resources for teaching and learning in Sidama language. However, 41.8 (58.8%) students mentioned that there is scarcity of learning and teaching resources in Sidama language. 5.5 (7.8%) respondents couldn't decide on the stated point. According to most respondents, there is clear teaching and learning resource limitations in Sidama language.

### **3.2 Teachers Questionnaire**

The first part of the teachers question was concerned with the teachers' interest and motivation to teach the Sidama language. Accordingly, 7 (66.3%) teachers disclosed that they are interested to teach various subjects in the Sidama language. But, 43(35.4%) teachers indicated that they are not so much interest and motivated to conduct classrooms in the Sidama language. This shows that most of the teachers are interested in teaching subjects in Sidama language, however, some teacher lose their interest and motivation to impart different subjects in the Sidama language.

The teachers were also asked about their feelings regarding the classroom interaction and checking the learners' understanding. Accordingly, 7 (68.3%) teachers replayed that the classroom interaction with learners and the learners understanding in the Sidama language classes are good. Nevertheless, 2.75 (24.9%) teachers don't agree on this. In addition, 0.75 (6.8%) teachers couldn't decide their position. This conveys that due to the use of Sidama language as medium of instruction, the degree of classroom interaction is improved and the extent checking understanding is facilitated.

The final part of the teachers' questionnaire was on code switching and marking assignments in the Sidama language classes. Most of the respondents, 7.5 (68.1%), replied that they feel code switching to other languages during mother tongue based instruction is not appropriate; 3.5 (31.7%) said that they agree on code switching. On the other hand, the respondents were asked about their interest of marking their learners' assignment and if their students experience writing problems. Accordingly, 6 (54.4%) respondents expressed that they are not interested to mark their students' script; they also confirmed that their students have problems of writing in the Sidama language. Conversely, 5 (45.4%) stated that they are interested to correct their learners' assignments; they said that their students' writing in the Sidama language has no problem. From this, we can say that most of the respondents confirmed that code switching is the common strategy in the mother tongue classroom. In addition, the teachers are not interested to mark their learners' writing assignments as their writings might have problems.

### **3.3 School Parents' Interview**

The other tool which the researcher has employed to gather data was an interview. Six school parents were interviewed to reflect their views on the seven semi structured questions.

The first question was "*Learners should be taught in their mother tongue language at primary level. Do you agree on this view?*" Accordingly, three parents confirmed their agreements, where as two parents said that they disagree on the issue. The rest, one individual disclosed that he partially agrees. This shows that, like that of the students, the parents' perception is not uniform on the importance of using mother tongue in the schools.

The second question forwarded to respondents was “*Do you think your child is able to perform at his/ her level best because Sidama language is used for teaching and learning? Why?*” Two of the respondents said that since the Sidama language became the medium of instruction, our children’s academic performance showed progress. This is because, they said, our students can cope up with the school environment very easily since the language used at home and school is the same. The other point is that the students can understand what the teacher’ say without any language related problems. On the contrary, three respondents disclosed that they don’t think. When they tried to justify their answers, said that some of the words are new for the students as they were created by the text book writers. This resulted in poor performance of the students. Similarly, they pointed out that the students are not giving due attention for what the teachers are teaching in the Sidama language as they perceive it as something which is easy. The rest, one informant, replied saying that Sidama language based instruction contributes for students result improvement to some extent only. From this, we can say that most of the parents believe that the Sidama language based instruction hasn’t brought sufficient change on the learners’ academic scores.

The other question raised during the interview was “*Do you think your child perform better in the exam if she/he is taught and examined in her/his indigenous language, Sidamigna?*” Among the interviewees, two of them replied positively to the issue. That means they have thought that their children’s perform well in the exam because they were taught in their language. On the contrary, three respondents reacted negatively to the contribution of the Sidama language for better performance of their children in the exams. One respondent shared the views of the former respondents equally. This shows that most of the respondents reacted that they don’t think mother instruction improves their children’s exam results.

Two questions: “*How does teaching in the medium of Sidama contribute to students’ in schools?*” and “*To what extent do you encourage your child to speak Sidama even at home?*” were also forwarded to the school parents. For the first one, they said that since the Sidama language is used as medium of instruction, it creates communicative environment by which the learners can claim whatever they need in the class and in the school compound without any reservation. In addition, it enforces the children to stay in the school happily which in turn reduces the dropout rate. Regarding the other question, almost all respondents confirmed that they do nothing special to encourage their children to speak the Sidama language at home.

The last inquiry to the parents was “*Are you happy if Sidama language becomes the medium of instruction throughout your child’s education? Why?*” Most of the parents replied that they won’t be happy if the language is used as a medium of instruction throughout their child’s education. The reason behind is that the students will not stay throughout their life in the Sidama areas. Rather, they may work in different areas of the country where the language (Sidama) may not be used any more. Moreover, as the children grew up, they join different higher education institutes where courses might be delivered in other languages. This might create confusion in the students’ academic career.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The main objective of the present study is to investigate the attitude and perception of school community towards mother tongue based classroom instruction. Very specifically, it aims to identify perception issues of school community related to mother tongue based classroom instruction. It also attempts to evaluate the attitude of teachers and learners in imparting and learning classroom knowledge in mother tongue. Eventually, it sorts out the challenges in their category and implies directions for future action.

The findings under the attitude and perception of the community on mother tongue based classroom instruction revealed that around half of the respondents in the students’ category have a positive attitude and perception and the rest half have a negative attitude and perception towards using mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Regarding teachers, almost 70 percent of them indicated they have positive attitude and perception on mother tongue use. In addition, most of the parents stated that they agree to use mother tongue for classroom education, however, considerable number of parents reacted negatively.

Regarding evaluating the attitude of teachers and learners in imparting and learning class room knowledge in mother tongue, though some of the students stated that leaning in Sidama language doesn’t contribute for their participation, most of the students disclosed that mother tongue promotes students involvement during classroom lesson. Richardson (2001) underscore on the importance MT in promoting learners participation. Surprisingly, this result is confirmed by teacher with equal figure in quantitative data. The other issue related to teaching and learning is measuring students’ performance through exams and assignments. Most of the parents don’t believe that their children’s results were improved due to the use mother tongue in classroom. But, if classroom participation increases, there will be improvement on the learners’ achievement (Smits et al., 2008). The question might be the degree of the progress. In relation to this, the teachers revealed that they are interested to administer tests, exams and assignments in a class, but their learners’ have been experiencing varieties of problems in their writing.

The last objective of the study is sorting out the opportunities and challenges that the learners and the teachers as

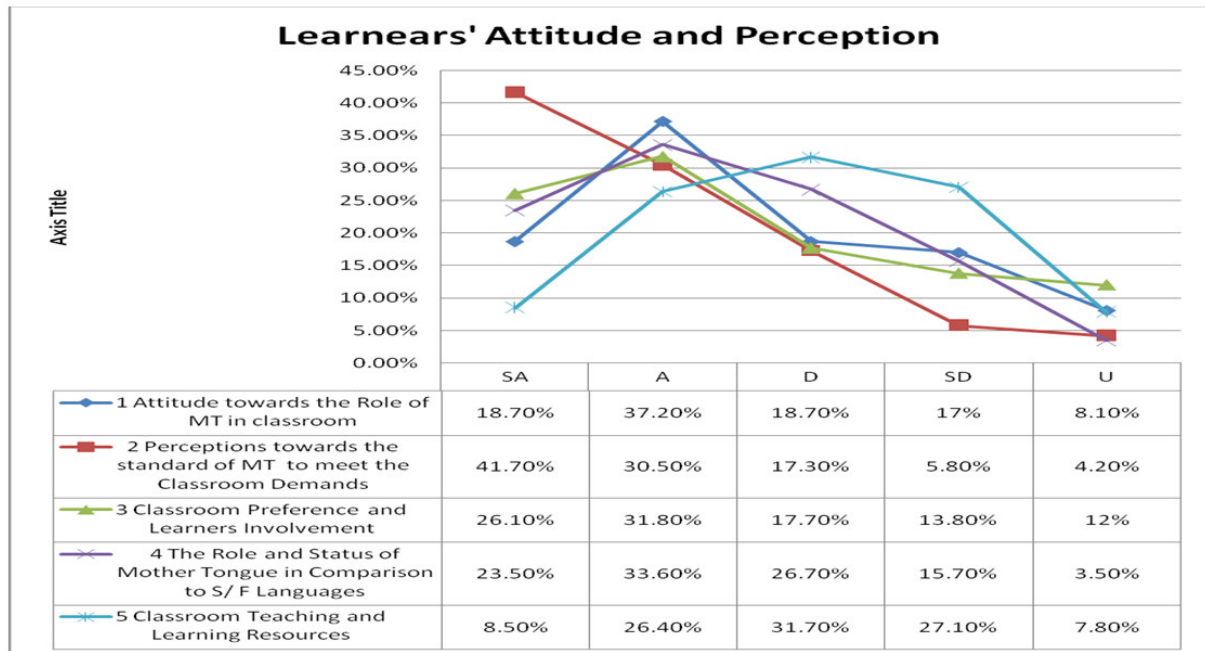
well as the parents are experiencing in handling mother tongue based Education. Most of the students revealed, as stated in Carole Benson (2004), that the main problem lies on the scarcity of references and learning materials in the Sidama language. Similarly, some students pointed out that learning in Sidama language affected their attempt to learn second/ foreign languages. On the contrary, the students disclosed that learning in the Sidama language has improved their classroom participation and interaction. This can be considered as an opportunity. For parents, as the students will not stay throughout their life in the Sidama areas where the language has wider operational range, rather they may work in different areas of the country where the language (Sidama) may not be used any more, mother tongue based instruction may not be significant for sustainable life career. As an opportunity, they confirmed that mother tongue based education creates communicative environment by which the learners can claim whatever they need in the class and in the school compound without any reservation. This in turn enforces the children to stay in the school happily which reduces the dropout rate.

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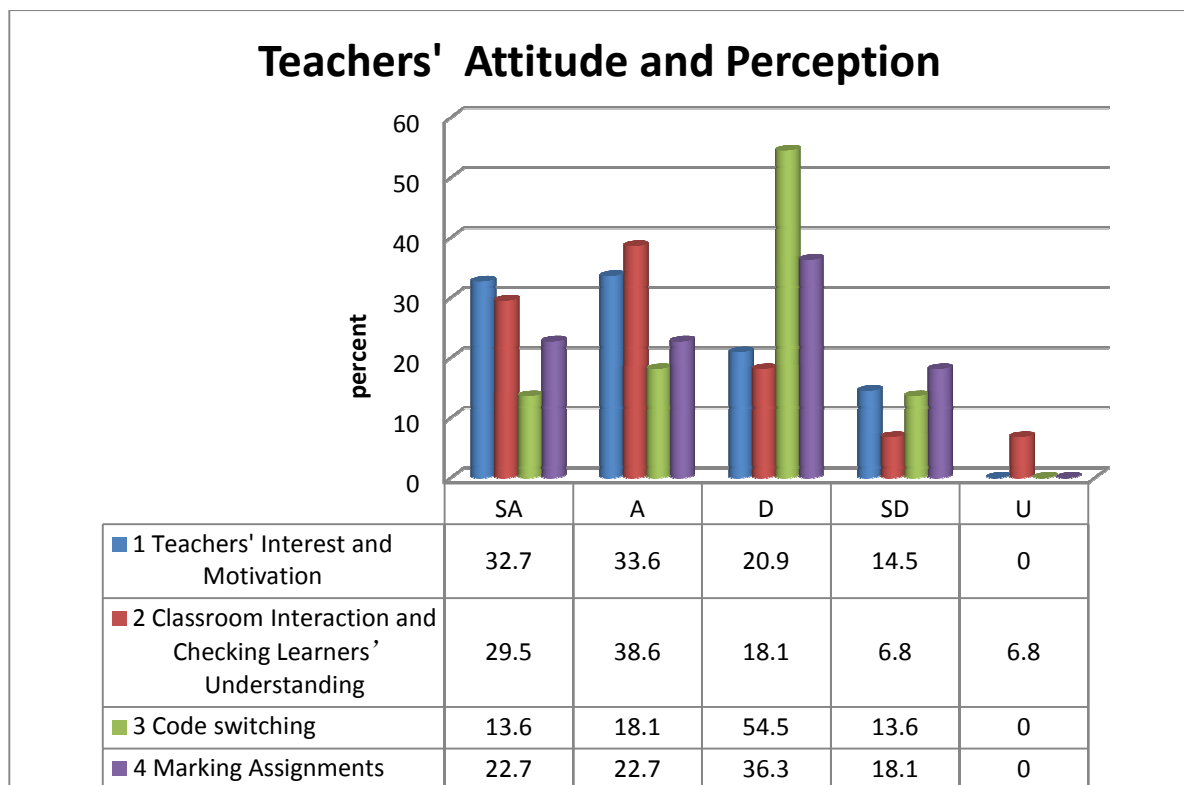
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## Graphic Representations

### 1. Students' Questionnaire



### 2. Teachers Questionnaire



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