

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



Recommended citation of this article

Asfaha, Y. M. (2015). English for Adults in Eritrea: Perspectives and Practices in Second Language Textbook Preparation. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 10(1), 187–198.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8024421>

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2014 Symposium held at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Van de Craats, I., Kurvers, J., & van Hout, R. (Eds.) (2015). *Adult literacy, second language and cognition*. Centre for Language Studies. Centre for Language Studies.

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/474>

About the Organization

LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org>

Website

<https://www.leslla.org/>

ENGLISH FOR ADULTS IN ERITREA: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK PREPARATION

Yonas Mesfun Asfaha, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Eritrea

Abstract

This paper outlines the process of preparing *English for Adults*, a set of teaching materials for adult literacy and post-literacy programmes in Eritrea. These programmes are taught in a number of local languages: the country supports the use of its nine native languages in education and English is offered as a subject for adult learners. In preparing these teaching materials, communicative approaches to second language learning and adult learner-centred instruction strategies were adopted with some elements of the traditional, grammar-based teaching methods incorporated. The project involved the entire staff of the Department of Adult Education and Media (DAEM), Eritrea's main provider of adult education programmes, and facilitators from adult learning centres in the country. The paper sets out the methodologies employed for undertaking this task in a relatively short timescale and the challenges faced in reconciling the different approaches to English language teaching.

Keywords: adult education, second language teaching, textbooks, English for adults, Eritrea

1. Introduction

This study examines the production of *English for Adults*, a set of teaching materials for adult literacy and post-literacy programmes in Eritrea. These programmes are offered in a number of local languages: Eritrea supports the use of its nine native languages in adult education. The country has recently begun to offer English as an element of its adult literacy and post-literacy programmes. A key consideration in writing English textbooks for adult learners was how best to gear these to their specific communication needs. As a result, the textbooks were designed in ways that incorporated communicative approaches to second language learning and adult learner-centred instruction. This contrasted with the more traditional grammar-based English language teaching

and teacher-centred instruction in Eritrea's formal school system. Central to the production of *English for Adults* was the involvement of the entire staff of the Department of Adult Education and Media (DAEM), a branch of the Ministry of Education and the main provider of Eritrea's adult education programmes, plus facilitators from the country's adult learning centres. They were tasked with assessing adult English language needs, preparing materials (e.g., reading passages, exercises) and commenting on draft chapters.

In 2011, I was hired by the British Council in Eritrea (which suspended its operation in the country a year later) to support DAEM in producing English teaching materials for their adult literacy and post-literacy programmes. My terms of reference for assisting DAEM in this project highlighted the following specific tasks to be completed within a 6 month period:

- Undertake a desktop review of existing literacy and post-literacy policy and programme documents, guidelines and frameworks;
- Design an action plan on how to proceed with the three-level adult education programmes;
- Design, develop and edit teachers' guides and students' textbooks for those programmes;
- Support DAEM in introducing effective teaching methods and preparing materials; and
- Complete and submit an electronic file of the teachers' guides and students' textbooks to DAEM.

This paper outlines the challenges and opportunities such an ambitious undertaking presented in introducing new perspectives, notably, complementing traditional, structure-based methods of English language teaching with communicative and learner-centred approaches. These perspectives are not entirely new to Eritrea. A communicative approach has been present in its formal education system since the mid 1990s. Learner-centred pedagogy was introduced as part of revisions to the national curriculum in 2004 (Government of Eritrea 2002). This paper will firstly set out an overview of adult education in Eritrea. It will then briefly describe the English teaching materials produced in 2011 and discuss the challenges faced in their preparation.

2. Education in Eritrea

Eritrea, a country in the Horn of Africa which gained independence in 1993, has a mother tongue education policy that allows members of all nine of its

ethnolinguistic groups to receive elementary formal and adult education in their native language. Eritrea's national curriculum involves teaching in nine native languages and three different writing systems: the full Latin alphabet (Bilen, Bidhaawyeet, Kunama, Saho, Nara, and Afar), consonantal-alphabetic Arabic script (Arabic) and syllabic Ge'ez script (Tigrinya and Tigre). English is taught in elementary schools and in literacy and post-literacy adult programmes as a preparation for English medium instruction in secondary and higher-level education.

Beyond its educational institutions, Eritrea's diversity of scripts and languages are evident in its public broadcast media, business, and local informal commerce. A walk along the streets of many towns will reveal the use of up to three scripts and languages in the signage of shops, bars and restaurants. The official nameplates of government offices are normally written in the three respective scripts of Tigrinya, Arabic and English, although most business is conducted in Tigrinya. Tigrinya and Arabic enjoy a prominent role in official public discourses. English, however, is the medium of instruction in all secondary and higher educational institutions and is the language of formal communication for local and international businesses like banks and insurance companies.

As with most institutions in Eritrea, its educational system has been heavily influenced by the country's liberation struggle against Ethiopia. In that context, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) has been credited with implementing social programmes in areas under its control. The 1983 – 1987 literacy campaign started with 451 graduates of the Revolutionary School and reached 56,000 adults in 183 learning centres (Gottesman 1998; 2000). Gottesman (1998: 254) stated that the teachers "worked to advance ... mass literacy, social change, and national liberation" within rural and nomadic communities and that the literacy campaign was one of the formative experiences of educators who are currently running Eritrea's multilingual educational system (Gottesman 2000).

Many of these fighters-turned-educators now work for DAEM, the leading body for providing adult education in Eritrea. DAEM has also been active in co-ordinating and regulating the curriculum for a wide range of private, public and NGO adult education providers. To help it achieve this task effectively, DAEM has devised the curriculum, prepared teaching materials in different languages and conducted assessment studies to better inform its practice. The various units within DAEM's Curriculum Division have been responsible for most of this activity. Through creative team work and by accessing external resources, they have successfully addressed the challenges presented to them.

3. Adult and non-formal education in Eritrea

DAEM's (2009: 2) policy document defines adult and non-formal education as:

The entire range of organized learning or educational activities outside the structure of the formal education system that are undertaken by adults and out-of-school youth, in order to enhance their quality of life, and thus enable them to contribute to the ongoing national development programme.

This broad definition includes activities that DAEM offers at three levels (literacy, post-literacy and continuing education) at more than 1000 learning centres across Eritrea. The Department also produces adult radio programmes in Tigrinya and Tigre, the two languages with the largest number of native speakers. DAEM's broad definition also includes language and computer and vocational (camera operation, etc.) training by private or non-governmental organisations. Adult evening classes based around the formal education curriculum are available in the towns and cities.

Eritrea's national adult education policy document (DAEM 2009) identifies the 15 – 45 age group as a key priority, with a particular focus on: disadvantaged groups such as women, disadvantaged rural areas, active members of the community (leaders), factory workers, demobilized soldiers, displaced persons, the disabled and prisoners.

An annual average of 55,000 adult learners, over 90% of them female, attended adult education programmes all over the country between 2001 and 2010. The average completion rate was 77%. By 2010 the number of adult programme centres in Eritrea had risen to 842 with all but one of its nine native languages being used as a medium of instruction. There were now over 2,200 facilitators (teachers) and 92 community rural reading rooms (DAEM 2013).

Curriculum and textbook development has been mainly the responsibility of DAEM's Curriculum Division, which contains panels of experts in Eritrean languages, English, numeracy, basic sciences and social studies. They are responsible for curriculum development and preparing teaching materials (textbooks) and facilitators' guides. In preparing teaching materials, panel members followed these guiding principles (DAEM 2013; DAEM 2009):

- encourage learner-centred pedagogy;
- encourage self-learning among adults;
- remain relevant to learners' daily lives outside the learning centre;
- encourage problem solving skills and creativity; and

- demonstrate gender sensitivity and awareness of cultural diversity.

By 1997, DAEM had produced a basic literacy and numeracy book for beginners in Tigrinya, whose native speakers account for 50% of Eritrea's population. In 1998, books in seven more languages were published, increasing the number of available titles for literacy and post-literacy programmes to fourteen (DAEM 2013) and covering eight of the country's nine languages. Speakers from each language group were invited to comment on the teaching materials to allow for further improvements before publication.

In the years that followed, a consensus-based approach was developed. Panels of six to eight writers, facilitators and other professionals from each language group were engaged to prepare teaching materials in each language for different areas of instruction. Starting with a common basic text or a scope-and-sequence description, the process involved upgrading the original materials, translating a concept in Tigrinya or English into the target language, resolving difficulties created by regional linguistic variations or dialects, and checking the manuscripts in detail for errors or inconsistencies. Before printing the books, a quality assurance workshop was convened, where experts from the formal education sector, the teacher training institute and other higher education bodies were invited to offer critical comments. Occasionally, this draft teaching material was distributed for the short-term use of facilitators and supervisors at learning centres: they were then invited to give feedback on these drafts. At the end of this process, the books were published and distributed to learning centres, sometimes with accompanying guidance (workshops) to facilitators on use of the teaching materials (DAEM 2013).

By 2013, DAEM had published teaching materials in all nine Eritrean languages for literacy programmes and in eight languages for post-literacy programmes. These covered basic literacy, numeracy and social studies. Similar processes were followed for Complementary Elementary Education (CEE) teaching materials, aimed at 9 – 14 year olds who for different reasons had not received formal education. English textbooks were also prepared for the literacy, post-literacy and CEE programmes. The production of English teaching materials for adult literacy and post-literacy differed from the CEE texts as the latter mainly involved adapting English textbooks designed for elementary level formal education. These were geared to the ultimate goal of mainstreaming CEE children into formal education at a middle school level.

The English teaching materials were produced in a similar manner. It involved a team of around 25 members, drawn from DAEM's Curriculum and Educational Media divisions (including its English and native language panels), plus external support from experienced teachers of regular or adult literacy from across Eritrea. Under the project's terms of reference, my remit as a consultant

was to assist them in designing, developing and editing the *English for Adults* learner books and the accompanying teachers' guides for all three levels of the country's adult literacy and post-literacy programmes.

I was also expected to support DAEM in introducing effective teaching methods and preparing materials and to complete and submit the corresponding electronic files to the Department. The initial work was conducted by the Curriculum Division's writing team with my support, whereas any subsequent changes were our joint responsibility. Certain team members produced a chapter based on agreed scope-and-sequence guidelines that originated from the outline of curriculum. Other consultants were responsible for reviewing each completed chapter and providing content and language related advice. Then, at a quality review workshop, curriculum staff in the formal education sector and teacher training institute personnel reviewed the later drafts, allowing for final revisions before publication.

The rationale for offering courses in English to adult learners is an important matter, and deserving of detailed discussion. The interviews conducted and documents assembled for the purposes of this paper provided strong evidence that DAEM staff were responding effectively to adult learners' requirements. For example, when drafting their national adult education policy document, the Department undertook consultative "meetings and workshops involving all key players in adult education" (DAEM 2009). Such activities, along with supervisory visits to learning centres and the comments of facilitators, have all informed decisions on the content of Eritrea's adult education curriculum and textbook development, including the decision to offer adult English courses (DAEM 2013; Ticabo Ayimut, Head, Curriculum Division, personal communication 2014). Another reason, apart from popular demand, is the prominent role that English plays in Eritrea's formal educational system where many graduates of its adult education programmes are expected to progress their education in regular classes. The importance of English can also be evidenced in the linguistic landscape of Eritrea's urban centres where written English, along with the major local languages, Tigrinya and Arabic, is widely used in signage along the streets (Asfaha 2009).

4. The *English for Adults* textbooks

In 1994, the Ministry of Education's English panel and experts from the British Council revised the English curriculum used in Eritrea's elementary schools with the primary objective of adopting a communicative approach. This, however, was never fully implemented (Wright 2002) and from 2002 onwards a

subsequent revision shifted the overall orientation to one that was more traditional and grammar-focused. The current elementary school English curriculum, where it is taught as a subject between first and fifth grades, emphasizes alphabet recognition, listening and oral comprehension in the first and second grades, and general vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing in third, fourth and fifth grades. It is therefore quite comprehensive and is supported by well-developed textbooks and a detailed teachers' guide (Walter & Davis 2005).

In contrast to this more formal approach, however, we recognised that different methodologies would be appropriate when designing the *English for Adults* textbook. We agreed that it would be better for the teaching material to embrace a communicative approach, which emphasises learners' practical use of English rather than teaching decontextualized language structures. This required us to address the functional language needs of adults, as these were likely to differ markedly from those of children in formal education. Those functional needs, however, had to be reconciled with the need to integrate adult education and continuing education graduates into Eritrea's mainstream education system. The content of *English for Adults* therefore had to strike a balance between material promoting communicative functions and material not that far removed from English as taught in formal education. For example, several exercises on vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing (heavily focused on in the formal education curriculum) were combined with speaking exercises and opportunities for learners to practise English in particular communicative contexts.

Other considerations included a focus on particular skills rather than on multiple skill areas spread thinly; learner-centred, interactive and participatory materials; and content that is contextualised to adult learners' daily lives (DAEM 2009). The introduction to *English for Adults* explains that the material:


... has been prepared with appropriate attention given to adult needs and learning preferences. The content is broad and relevant to their daily lives. The learner centred teaching adopted allows for pair and group activities and independent learning through take-home assignments and use of a glossary of key words and language focus boxes within the textbook.

The main goal of the adult English programme is set out in the expected learning outcomes statement in the Level 3 Teachers' Guide: "By the end of the third level English for Adults programme, the learners are expected to communicate in basic English in different contexts using a core vocabulary in the range of 1,200 – 1,300 words and using basic grammar."

After the introduction and the table of contents, the books contain a 'book map', described as follows:

The book map has different columns: unit and title, competencies, grammar, vocabulary and sub-skills. The unit and title column gives the unit number and topic or theme for each unit. The competencies column states what learners, after finishing the lessons in the unit, are expected to do using the English they acquired (for example, ask for and give directions). The grammar and vocabulary columns give list[s] of structures and words that are covered in each unit. Any additional skills taught in each unit are listed under the sub skill column. The list of words at the end of the book gives basic meanings of key words introduced or used in the book.

Listening: Abadi goes to a fruit market
Listen to the dialogue.



Abadi: Good morning.
Shopkeeper: Good morning. How can I help you?
Abadi: Do you have papayas?
Shopkeeper: Yes, we have papayas. We also have mangos, oranges, watermelon, ...
Abadi: I will have a kilo of papayas, please.
Shopkeeper: Here you are. Do you need anything else?
Abadi: Yes, can I have some lemons, please?
Shopkeeper: Here you are. That will be 45 Nakfa.
Abadi: Thank you.
Shopkeeper: You are welcome.

Figure 1: A sample exercise focusing on how to start, proceed and end conversation in a market context (Level 1 English for Adults)

The main body of the textbooks contains illustrated exercises, prompting learners to 'look and say', 'listen and say', plus exercises in listening, speaking and, eventually, writing. Individual, pair and group work, and take-home assignments were considered particularly effective for adult learners. Role-play, games, research and presentation were also included. As electronically-recorded exercises may not be always available to teachers in Eritrea, transcripts of all listening materials were provided at the end of the teachers' guide.

Grammar: Indirect speech

Work in pairs. Rewrite the following sentences into indirect speech.

*This is Fatuma.
She said she had
a sore throat.*



Example: Fatuma said "I have a sore throat."
 She said she had a sore throat.

1. He said "I get pain in my stomach."
2. They said "[W]e can't sleep well."
3. The doctor said "The patient has a fever."
4. She said "I comb my hair every day."
5. Milkias said "I use [a] toothbrush every day."

Figure 2: A sample exercise focusing on grammar (Level 3 English for Adults)¹

5. Challenges

One of the biggest challenges our team faced was that of balancing the conflicting demands of the traditional grammar-based and the communicative approaches. The writing team encountered various levels of resistance to

content deviating from established conventions in formal education. This was reflected not only in the choice of content but also in perceptions of the teacher/facilitator's role. What kind of games should be incorporated in the teaching materials? Is the teacher's role one of imparting knowledge to learners or that of a mere facilitator? Efforts were made to answer these and other questions in ways that sought to balance the opposing concerns. Another persistent theme was the need not to deviate too far from the content and style of materials used in formal education in order not to disadvantage learners who wish to continue in the mainstream education system after completing the adult programmes. Running counter to this, however, was the need to acknowledge the differences in learning preparedness and life experiences between adults and children. These matters were fully addressed by the project team in their efforts to reach a balance between traditional content and the communicative approach. Allowing contributors to devise teaching content in isolation meant losing editorial control over the content of their assigned chapters. While encouraging creativity, this ran the risk of some teams submitting non-original materials as their own. Time constraints meant that it was not always possible to check their originality.

Incorporating L2 writing skills teaching materials into the overall process proved difficult. Because the target learners of Level 1 *English for Adults* were still attending literacy programmes in their respective native languages, it was assumed that the development of their English writing skills would have to wait until the post-literacy programme stage. However, there was a strong push by the Curriculum Division to incorporate writing skills in the Level 1 materials. As a compromise, exercises on writing the letters of the English alphabet were included immediately following the lessons on the phonics of spoken English.

Due to the prevailing economic situation in Eritrea and difficulties in bilateral and multilateral cooperation (e.g., the British Council suspended its operations), some of the final stages of the *English for Adults* project have not yet been completed. Although the books and guides have already been printed and partially distributed, workshops to assist teachers in their use have not taken place. A systematic study of teachers' feedback on the textbooks and teacher guides remains to be designed.

English has no social or cultural roots in Eritrea despite its prominence in the country's educational institutions and its visibility in the urban linguistic landscape. This created a practical challenge in designing certain aspects of the teaching materials. As none of the team members or consultants in the project were native English speakers, some tasks, such as designing phonics exercises, posed difficulties.

The role of English in adult education might also help generate critical reflections on the status of the language in Eritrea. Questions can be raised as to why English enjoys such prominence in the education system of a country where it has a limited social role and use (Walter & Davis 2005). One may argue that the Eritrean education system, whose roots lie in revolutionary resistance and sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity (Gottesman 1998), may have partly given way to the ideological influences of English as a world language in a country where minority and dominant native languages are promoted in the educational system. However, it is also possible to argue that this specific project to produce English teaching materials is yet another example of adapting and owning (Wright, 2002) the global language and the teaching innovations associated with it by local educators and learners in a post-conflict social context.

Note

- 1 I thank an anonymous reviewer and a proofreader for pointing out these errors in the extracts from the textbooks which have already been published, unfortunately, with these mistakes on them.

References

- Asfaha, Y.M. (2009). English literacy in schools and public places in multilingual Eritrea. In I. Van de Craats, & J. Kurvers (eds.). *Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition. Proceedings of the 4th LESLLA symposium, Antwerp, 2008* (pp. 213-221). Utrecht: LOT, Occasional Series 15.
- Department of Adult Education and Media (DAEM) (2009). National Policy on Adult and Non-formal Education, Ministry of Education, Eritrea. (draft document)
- DAEM (2013). *Adult Education Magazine*. (A magazine in Tigrinya published on the occasion of the world literacy day 2013). Ministry of Education, Eritrea.
- Gottesman, L. (1998). *To fight and learn: The praxis and promise of literacy in Eritrea's Independence War*. Lawrenceville, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Red Sea Press.
- Gottesman, L. (2000). Reading behind the (enemy's) lines: Fighter-teachers of Eritrea's Independence War. In S. Martinot, & J. James (eds.), *The problems of resistance: Studies in alternative political cultures, radical philosophy today* (Vol. II, pp. 274-288). Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press.
- Government of Eritrea (2002). Concept paper for a rapid transformation of the Eritrean educational system. Unpublished document. Asmara: Government of Eritrea.

- Walter, S.L., & P.M. Davis (2005). *The Eritrea national reading survey*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- Wright, M.W. (2002). *Ideologies and methodologies in language and literacy instruction in postcolonial Eritrea*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.