

**JUMPING THE BARRIERS
LANGUAGE LEARNING
WITH REFUGEE GROUPS IN NEW ZEALAND**

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the language learning of recent pre-literate adult African refugees in West Auckland. Research indicates that 80% of adult quota refugees who arrive have arrived in New Zealand since 1995 have not completed a primary school education. About half of this group are pre-literate with the remainder semi-literate. Those who have little or no literacy in their own language experience greater difficulties in learning to read and write English than those who already possess the skills of reading and writing in their own language.

This paper describes their language learning issues in New Zealand, the factors which predict learning difficulties and the barriers to their learning success. Suggestions to assist their learning are also described, drawing on the presenters' experience.

A pilot project was undertaken at UNITEC to train Africans to teach literacy to their own people. The project has been an important avenue for strengthening refugee communities' capacity to participate in their own resettlement process. This project is now being extended as a joint project between UNITEC and ESOL Home Tutor Schemes.

This paper is divided into three main sections:

- The first looks at the recent refugee situation in Auckland in terms of literacy experience and English language level and includes a brief description of the experiences of some people who started learning English in 1996.

- The second section examines the language learning issues for these refugees and the consequent impact on their resettlement.
- To conclude a pilot training project with bilingual tutors from refugee communities will be outlined and issues which arose from the project will be outlined.

PART ONE: THE REFUGEE SITUATION

New Zealand has a UN quota of 750 refugees annually. Other people of refugee background also gain entry to this country on the grounds of family re-unification or arrive, apply for and are eventually granted refugee status. On arrival in New Zealand the 750 p.a. intake of refugees between 1995-2000 has generally had a low level of English, 89 % of them having less than the elementary level of English required for the most basic forms of communication and 19% of these people also being pre-literate in their mother tongue.

However referring to the graphs (see appendix 1) of Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali and Kurdish refugees who have moved into the Central / West Auckland area the statistics are:

	Pre-literate	No English literacy	Beginner English	Elementary English	Total: elementary and under
Somali	27%	18%	33%	12%	90%
Ethiopian	22%	27%	27%	18%	87%
Eritrean	25%	16%	31%	10%	89%
Kurdish	36%	25%	25%	10%	96%

Since the majority of refugees and immigrants join previously-established communities in Auckland, the issues that these people's situation raises clearly loom larger in Auckland than elsewhere.

Gardner (1996:2) defines states of literacy relevant to these immigrants:

Pre-literate: not literate in any language and come from a society or a section of society where literacy plays little / no part in communication

Semi-literate: have some literacy skills in their first language but are not confident to use literacy in learning a new language

Of the UN quota refugee intake living in West/Central Auckland most of them fit into these two categories of literacy. These are people who can't read a medicine label, understand their child's school report, understand a power bill or get a bus to an unfamiliar destination without help, often help from one of the few literate, English-speaking members of their community. Such educated people usually spend many unpaid hours helping friends visit WINZ or the doctor and so on, since there are virtually no paid community workers or translators. For the pre-literate person, this is cumulatively an extremely disempowering situation. One man explained that, when he was in his first country of refuge in Africa, he had a job, a home with his own furniture and the respect of his family. Here in New Zealand he has no job, second-hand furniture and he feels like a nobody.

Another member of the same African refugee community asked

Why bring us here to New Zealand and then make it impossible for us to work for our living?

This is effectively what has happened, because their arrival has coincided with a period of social and political policy in which social equity objectives were not deemed to be the responsibility of the state.

Whereas in different eras or sets of economic circumstances people with little formal education may have been absorbed into the workforce, in these times they were considered to lack marketable job skills, including the ability to speak and understand English. We have been living in a period in which the English language has become a job market commodity, in that those who lack this essential commodity must pay substantial fees to acquire it. If they are unable to do so, they may be funded by the state (in the form of Work and Income New Zealand or Skill NZ) into a strictly limited amount of skill acquisition: the success of fully-funded "training" has been measured by the percentage of "trainees" who either found jobs or who moved up a step on a learning "staircase" of which the apex is a job.

Davison's (1996) definition of literacy is the ability to:

- read and use information
- write appropriately (in a range of contexts)
- function effectively in society

Using this definition of literacy almost all of these refugees, cannot function effectively in NZ. Literacy is part of everyday communication, and so plans for enhancing literacy levels need to take this seriously into account if they are to have any chance of affecting the everyday lives of their clients.

FIVE YEARS IN AOTEAROA



This is a photograph of a beginner English class at UNITEC Institute of Technology in 1996. The students were immigrants and refugees from five different countries, all aged between 25 and 40 who had been in New Zealand less than 2 years. 3 people had been educated to tertiary level, 3 had secondary schooling while 3 people had never been to school at all. A further 4 people had

experienced a minimal amount of primary education, which meant that they would struggle to write a letter to family back home: probably not a major problem since many of their family members would also not be literate. They came from rural communities which have been disrupted by war and other disasters for much of their lifetime. Most of the other class members came from literate urban communities in which formal education was more widely available.

Although the people in this group came from disparate backgrounds, they shared some common aspirations and needs as learners. Their common lack of English barred them from most paid work and other forms of participation in the wider community. In the classroom, those who had previous experience of formal education could make rapid progress using formal learning methodology while those who had little or no schooling struggled to grasp the basics and made little measurable progress, a situation as frustrating for them as it was for their teacher.

Five years later, the current situation of all of this group is not known. However, one of the well-educated class members has become the editor of a community-language newspaper, in which capacity he interviewed the then Prime Minister without a translator. Other "educated" class members also have jobs of various types. Of the people who had little or no literacy, five don't have paid work nor do they yet have fully functional literacy skills in English. All of these people have attended further courses of various types or been tutored by Home Tutors or similar, yet none of them would fulfill Davison's description of a literate person.

LANGUAGE LEARNING ISSUES

The findings of Jenny Ram's NCELTR project in Australia, in 1992 with learners with a minimal formal education were that:

- learners should be placed in classes with others of a similar educational background
- low level literacy learners should stay in these classes until they acquire formal learning strategies that will enable them to access other learning options
- all teachers should receive professional development support to assist them with appropriate methodology and teaching materials
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- low level literacy learners were found to need 400 hours tuition to progress one point on the ASLPR scale. As Survival English level is between 1+2 these learners need between 800-1200 hours to reach this level. (equivalent to 18mths - 2 years full time)

These 1996 learners did not have any of these opportunities in full and Ramm's recommendations have unfortunately proved to be an accurate prediction of their lack of success.

Surprisingly few researchers in this area have mentioned an issue which, to non-language teachers at least, is obvious and problematical: how can the teacher communicate with the students if he/she can't speak their language? This issue is particularly pertinent for learners with little formal educational experience because they have little awareness of the common expectations of the learning situation, and no study skills to help them learn. Yet English

teachers who are themselves bilingual or from language minority communities are rare in our staff-rooms.

Bilingual Tutor Training project

At Unitec Institute of Technology, our response to the appearance in our beginner and elementary English classes in the mid 1990s of African and Middle Eastern refugees, many of whom were of limited educational background, was at first to try and secure funding so that we could run literacy/ ESOL classes which we assumed would be suitable for them. However, this funding was not forthcoming and so we had to look for other ways to meet the learning needs in their community. Other organisations were also responding to this situation: the West Auckland Home Tutor Society has developed a range of part-time community classes in consultation with their communities, and AUT has some appropriate places in classes. However, the provision available was totally inadequate. It was largely because we were not handed funding to do what we had initially assumed was "appropriate" that we began to think about alternative models. One



type of alternative model involves training bilingual tutors or peer tutors to teach members of their own communities. The Auckland North region of WINZ decided to fund a training course for 10 bilingual tutors at UNITEC. The tutors completed their training in mid 2,000.

The training programme was originally designed mainly to train or re-train members of refugee communities as tutors of basic English language and literacy skills. Accordingly, the training focused on introducing theories of literacy, numeracy and

language teaching, theories of adult learning and practical tutoring skills. The trainees were recruited in consultation with community organizations and are from the Somali, Ethiopian, Oromo and Iraqi communities. They needed to have a good standard of English and to have had at least a secondary education. This posed some problems during recruitment, since there are far fewer educated women in these communities yet the majority of their future students would be women. Two Somali women started the course but one had to drop out for personal reasons. The other tutors are all male, and have a range of educational and professional backgrounds. Two are ex-tertiary lecturers themselves, three are ex-teachers and four didn't have a teaching background. Both those with and those without previous teacher training have been able to become effective tutors and it is perhaps worth noting that other projects which used previously untrained teachers have found that they are effective. (e.g. D'Annunzio 1995)

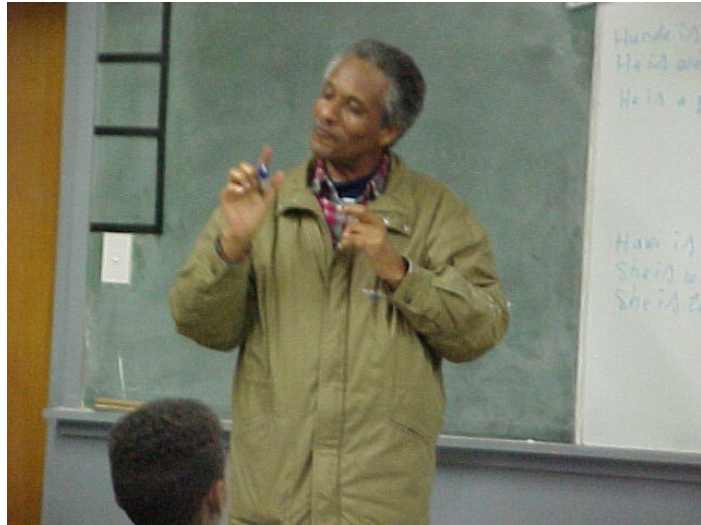
The course also included some computing skills and discussion of community funding issues. This proved to be more crucial for the tutors than had been expected, partly because there was no provision made to fund the classes that they were hoping to teach. However, we came to the

conclusion that the tutors should not have to also be the funding applicants, since this would be done better by administrators in community organizations. The tutors' community organizations have mostly not yet developed the infrastructure to do this. In the process of discussing funding, one of the tutors remarked that

“We know we have to knock on doors but we don't know which doors or how to knock”.

This really highlighted a key role that the tutors take when they are working with their students: they pass on knowledge and information which their pre-literate learners otherwise have no access to, doing this in an equitable and empowering fashion. Yet the tutors themselves are recently arrived and often don't know “how things work”.

Understanding how and why WINZ was funding their course yet was not going to fund their teaching was one of the issues on which enlightenment was sought. We, the course lecturers, found ourselves positioned as sharers of knowledge about systems rather than as the skills developers we had expected to be.



The tutors teach quite differently from teachers like ourselves, who do not share our students' language and culture. When two of the course lecturers started to observe a group of bilingual teacher trainees doing teaching practice, we were rather disconcerted to realize that we couldn't understand most of what they and their students were saying. There also seemed to be a lot of teacher talk going on, and quite a lot of student questioning. When we were teaching adult learning theory and language learning theory, teacher talk and explanation was discouraged in favour of student input, language practice and discussion. In most of the classes we were observing, most of the time was taken up with discussion in students' first language. A student would ask a question, maybe about a grammar point or spelling or hand-writing and the teacher would explain. Sometimes the student would be asking about the task they were expected to do on a handout and the teacher would be able to explain both the task and the rationale behind it. Any question might lead to further questions and explanations. In one group, students and teachers who were all from the same country shared five languages between them, so the linguistic complexities of their discussions were quite elaborate.

These students and teachers were not just chatting: they were working hard to negotiate shared meaning and understanding. When the tutors started to run community classes and their students were asked to evaluate their teaching, almost all of the students said that what they most liked about the class is that the teacher can explain things to them in their own language. These classes are run in the evenings in community education centers and some students have come to these classes who are also attending day classes taught by a native speaker of English.

These students will bring a handout from their day class to their evening class, so that they can discuss it with their bilingual teacher. When asked why they did this, they said that they wasn't because they are critical of the daytime teacher, but because they want to understand the ideas behind the handout better. These people, who have been respected adults in their community previously want a more critical understanding than they can gain through the limited amount of discussion that is possible with a teacher who doesn't speak their language.

Freebody and Luke (1994) defined 4 roles for a reader: Code breaker text participant, text user and text analyst "knowing what the text is trying to do to them as well as what they can do with the text" . However much English and literacy teaching to adults here and overseas has take a narrow view , functional view of literacy (Murray 1998). If the teacher is unable to communicate with the learners at anything above a very basic level, this will be the most likely result of their teaching. Teachers who can communicate with students in a common language that both know well can enable people to develop the kinds of literacy skills which are needed for people in a country like New Zealand.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

Learners from the recently arrived refugee communities in West and central Auckland continue to need literacy and English classes that are are low cost, half time, long term, grouped with similar learners and with trained teachers who understand their needs. Bilingual tutors may well be able to provide appropriate teaching for these learners.

Funding for their teaching

Towards the end of their training the issue of how to fund their teaching loomed large. The West Auckland ESOL Home Tutors donated their Community Education hours in term 2 and many other Community Education providers donated unused hours for the remainder of the year. As a result five classes ran: two Amharic, and one class each for Somali, Oromo and Kurdish learners. Between 50-60 learners attended each term.

Classes all ran for 6 weeks only each term: the Amharic and Somali for 4 hours each week and the Oromo and Kurdish for 2 hours each week.

Community Education was approached for further hours in 2001 - half of the hours applied for were received. The hours applied for still being far short of the real hours needed to bring these learners to survival level English.

WHAT NOW?

At the end of December the National ESOL Home Tutor Scheme received Government money to fund classes for low level literacy learners in West and South Auckland. West Auckland will run four 12 hour a week classes for 32 weeks, while South Auckland will run one 12 hour class and two 2hour a week classes who will have English native speaker teachers. This funding is connected to a project looking at measuring the gains made in literacy by these learners.

School of English staff at UNITEC will undertake the research aspects of the project.

Other pre-literate learners are living in Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch. Training needs to be given to bilingual tutors who could assist these learners.

The bilingual tutor training project has to date been a unique partnership between refugee communities, a tertiary institution and a community education organization. We believe that the lessons we have learned from this project provide a good model for similar partnerships elsewhere in the country.

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