

ENGLISH LITERACY IN SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC PLACES IN MULTILINGUAL ERITREA

Yonas Mesfun Asfaha, Tilburg University

1 Introduction

As in many countries of Africa, the English language plays an important role in Eritrea. English is the language of educational instruction in junior, secondary and higher levels of education. English is also in use in governmental offices, international businesses and in service rendering institutions (e.g., restaurants, hotels, groceries) in major urban centres in the country. However, unlike many countries in Africa, Eritrea does not accord official language status to English or any of its national languages. With the aim of highlighting the role of the English language and literacy in Eritrea, this contribution describes the general language policy in the country, the use of English in schools and the display of English signs and messages in public places.

Eritrea is a small country in the Horn of Africa on the Red Sea. Eritrea was colonized for over a century by Italy, Great Britain and Ethiopia respectively, before gaining independence in 1993. Eritrea is a linguistically diverse country with 3.6 million inhabitants belonging to nine different language groups, representing three language families and three different scripts. The Semitic languages Tigrinya and Tigre use a syllabic script called Ge'ez (alternatively known as *Fidel* or Ethiopic script), the Nilo-Saharan languages Kunama and Nara, as well as the Cushitic languages Afar, Saho, Bilen and Bidhaawyeet, use alphabetic Latin script, and Arabic is written in a consonantal alphabetic Arabic script.

Concerning the provisions of the language policy in education, all nine Eritrean languages and the three scripts are used in elementary education throughout the country (Department of Education, 1991). The education policy allows children to attend elementary schools that use their mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Parents can also choose to send their children to schools where one of the languages of wider communication (Tigrinya and Arabic) is the medium of instruction. English is taught as a subject starting from second grade in elementary schools and is the language of instruction in secondary schools and higher education.

Language and literacy use studies in Eritrea reveal a complex multilingual scenario in urban and rural contexts. In one of the few studies on language use in Eritrea, Cooper & Carpenter found that Arabic, Bilen, Tigre and Tigrinya 'compete' in the market place in Keren, a small town in north central Eritrea (as cited in Hailemariam, 2002). Many towns in Eritrea are multilingual urban centres where a number of the languages co-exist with the languages of wider communication. Hailemariam (2002) compared language use at home and schools in four towns (Keren, Ghindae, Senafe,

and Barentu) and four villages (Melebso, Sheab, Igila, and Ogana). He observed greater mismatch between school and home language use in towns than in villages. For example, many of the Tigre, Bilen, and Tigrinya students (n: 47) attending Arabic medium school in the town of Keren reported using their first languages with family members and friends only occasionally, while most of the students (n: 23) from the village of Melebso nearby reported frequent use of their home language (Tigre), which was also the language of the school.

Tigrinya, Arabic and English are the working languages in the country, in spite of the fact that the language policy does not recognize official languages (Asfaha, Kurvers, & Kroon, 2008). Therefore, Tigrinya, Arabic and English, as the working languages, and Tigre, as the language of the second largest group in the population, cover most of the linguistic landscape in the country. Tigrinya, as one of the languages of wider communication, is commonly used in public, commercial and inter-group communication. The more formal functions in public offices are also mainly carried out in the Tigrinya language. The English language enjoys the status of working language of higher public offices (i.e., ministries, authorities, and agencies) and institutions of higher education and commerce, such as banks and corporations. Despite its popularity among Eritreans, the frequent use of standard Arabic is only limited to Eritrea's political, business and religious elite. The use of Arabic in the general public is restricted to the more colloquial use of the language in market places and other less formal contexts.

2 *English in Eritrean schools*

English was widely introduced in Eritrea during the British military administration (1941-1952). Although it has remained an important language in the country ever since, after Eritrea's independence in 1991 English was made the language of instruction in secondary and higher levels of education. Outside of the educational context, the role of English, described by Woldemikael (2003: 123) as 'a neutral language without a strong social or political base in Eritrea', was assessed as limited (Walter & Davis, 2005).

The decision to give English such a powerful role in education in Eritrea might have been influenced more by the official status of the language in other African countries rather than by its position in Eritrea where Tigrinya and Arabic are sufficient in order for the social and political domains to flourish (Hailemariam, 2002: 77). Walter & Davis called the decision to promote English in education 'bold but not revolutionary' (2005: 337). A revolutionary step might have involved devising a curriculum based on the existing national languages replacing the role of English as a medium of instruction in schools.

Although English remains the language of instruction in middle, secondary and college level education, the level of English proficiency has stayed very low throughout the educational system. The 2002 *Eritrea National Reading Survey*, for example, found that the English proficiency of elementary students was so low that only less than 15 percent of fifth grade Eritrean students demonstrated good enough control of English to allow them to handle the demands of middle school that started in sixth grade (Walter & Davis, 2005). There are many factors contributing to the low levels of

English proficiency. One challenge for students trying to learn English in the elementary schools is the low amount of time (450 contact hours) spent on the task. According to Walter and Davis (2005), at least four times this amount of time (1800 hours) is needed in order for the average child to be able to reach the level of English proficiency demanded in middle school. The other factor could be the low English proficiency of the elementary school teachers. Elementary teachers receive one year of teacher training after they have completed high school. Having teachers whose English is weak creates a major obstacle in building English skills in the students. In addition, the English curriculum does not allow teachers to use traditional teaching methods (e.g. chanting after the teacher) that they might be very familiar with (Wright, 2002).

3 *English literacy in public places*

The use of written language in public places in Eritrea reflects the diversity in languages and scripts in the country. Compared to rural settings, the major urban centres show a better public print atmosphere with street signs, names of businesses and public offices written in three languages (Tigrinya, Arabic and English) and three scripts (Ge'ez, Arabic and Latin). A similar mix of languages and scripts is usually applied to produce handwritten signs, announcements and graffiti on notice boards and walls. For example, the ubiquitous 'smoking is not allowed' sign commonly appears in the three languages (Tigrinya, Arabic and English) and three scripts (Ge'ez, Arabic and Latin). A computer print out of this sign has even become a standard item available at stationary shops for sale.

Linguistic landscape studies (e.g., Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009) have shown that the visibility of languages in the mix of multilingual street signs, billboards, place names, etc. might be informative in at least two ways. The prevalence of a particular language in public places gives an indication about the power position or status and vitality of that language compared to other languages. It could also serve as a geographical marker indicating that a particular language is spoken or allowed or accepted for use in a specific urban area (as a result of the predominance of the speakers in that area). Linguistic landscape studies may help us understand the prevalence of English language in public places in Eritrea. As we have already seen the country's policy gives English a prominent role in the educational and official settings. In this section, we examine if English is given similar importance or visibility in the linguistic landscape in the city centre in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea.

Based on data (i.e., pictures, interviews, etc.) collected in March 2009,¹ this section describes the use of English written texts in the streets, cafés, restaurants and other public places in the city centre of Asmara.

The majority of the signs of names on government offices and big businesses in the centre of Asmara are written in three languages – Tigrinya, Arabic and English (see Figure 1). The names of the institutions in Figure 1 (the 'Ministry of Tourism' in the sign on the left and 'Petroleum Corporation of Eritrea' on the right) appear in a typical ordering of the languages – Tigrinya, Arabic, and English – in name signs of public offices. It is worth noting that some of the information provided in these signs

¹ Part of the data in this section were collected by Debbie de Poorter and Marijke Vormeer for their master theses in Intercultural Communication at Tilburg University.

sometimes appears only in one or the other language. In Figure 1, while the information indicating the location of the offices ('2nd. and 3rd. FLOOR') in the sign on the left appears in three languages, similar information is provided only in English in the sign on the right.



Figure 1: Names of public offices written in three languages

According to Saleh Idris, head of the elementary education curriculum at the Ministry of Education, there is no rule or law that requires private citizens, private businesses and public offices to use (only) these three languages in publicly displaying the names of offices and business. As mentioned earlier, the government policy acknowledges the equality of the nine national languages and promotes their use in education and media. However, government offices routinely employ these three languages – Tigrinya, Arabic, and English – in their day to day activities. Saleh said that people usually assume that, as these are the working languages of the government, they have to use them in writing names (personal communication, March 2009). Some of the business owners interviewed said they use these languages because they thought these languages are the official languages in Eritrea.

Linguistic landscape studies show that the prominence given to a particular language in a multilingual name or street sign might indicate the relative importance of that language in comparison to the rest of the languages in the sign (Collins & Slembrouck, 2007). Using bigger font size for one of the languages in a multilingual street sign may, for example, indicate the relatively higher status of that particular language. The order of appearance of the languages – Tigrinya, Arabic and English – in the signs in Figure 1 might, at first glance, be considered an indication of the levels of importance assigned to each of these languages, with Tigrinya enjoying the highest status and English the lowest among the three working languages in the country. However, a closer look at public places outside these government offices and big businesses shows a much more prominent visibility of English. Increasingly, we see

more and more use of English in and around businesses and in the streets of Asmara (Saleh Idris, personal communication, March 2009).

These English signs and messages are usually shown alone (Figure 3) or alongside Tigrinya (Figure 2). Figure 3 shows a handwritten 'NO PARKING' sign displayed on an iron gate of a private property in the centre of Asmara. The owners of the property probably chose to use English language as many of the formal traffic signs (e.g., 'Stop', 'Give way', etc.) in the streets of Asmara are in English. However, the handwritten 'NO PARKING' sign is lacking the colourful embellishment the formal traffic signs usually have. It can be said that while the formal traffic symbols mostly rely on the visual aspect of the signs, the handwritten signs may require greater knowledge of the English language.

Figure 2 shows English and Tigrinya languages used to produce a list of drinks and pastries at a café. Many restaurants and cafes freely use both languages to write their menus. Sometimes the information given in one language is not entirely reproduced in the other language. For example, in Figure 2, the 'City cake Cafeteria' menu has the title 'PRICE & LISTS' in English which is also reproduced in Tigrinya in the next line. However, each entry of drinks and pastries and the accompanying price is given in Tigrinya only. The name of the café is finally given in English only. The use of English words (city, modern, sweet, fun, etc.) as names or parts of names of restaurants and cafes has become common in Asmara.

There are many instances of exclusive use of English language in producing different texts. Many restaurants chose to produce their menus in English. One example is the menu from the Pizza and Spaghetti House (see Figure 4) in the centre of Asmara. In this passage, an introductory page to the thick menu, customers are invited to discover 'the rustic flavours' of dishes 'prepared with the finest ingredients specially selected and imported' from countries like Italy, Spain, and China. In Pizza and Spaghetti House, which serves many customers from the Italian school nearby, names and descriptions of entries in the menu are given in both Italian and English, although the introductory page is written in English. In an interview on their choice of languages, the manager said as the restaurant specializes in Italian food (pizzas and pasta dishes) and there are no corresponding Tigrinya names for the entries, they saw no reason to use Tigrinya. In addition, the manager said 'English makes us look good' (personal communication, March 2009).

There are also government institutions that work exclusively in English. This is because, as one of the working languages of the government, English is the language of business in ministries, agencies (e.g., inland revenue office, civil aviation), corporations, banks, higher education institutions and civil and sport associations.

Formal communication, documentation, correspondences with local and international partners, reports etc. in these institutions are done mainly in the English language. For example, formal correspondences among these institutions or between them and other international organizations are mostly done in English. Figure 5 shows a formal letter from one of the colleges, College of Arts and Social Sciences, addressed to the local office of the World Bank. Although both Tigrinya and English appear in the letter headings, the content of the letter is all in English.

government. Saleh said that the common use of written English (as well as written Tigrinya and Arabic) in public places might be a reflection of this perception of the language policy (personal communication, March 2009).

The English literacy represented here by samples of pictures from the city centre in Asmara show some of the characteristics of what Blommaert (2008) calls 'grassroots literacy'. These characteristics of grassroots literacy include unstable orthography, non-standard use of written language, unconventional genre, and poor print production (Juffermans, 2008). In an example of non-standard use of language, Figure 7 shows the 'LOOK AND KNOW OUR WORLD'S DIFFERENT MONEY' sign displayed in an antique shop window inviting passersby to have a look at different currencies from around the world. Another example of non-standard spelling is the 'Riffil ink' ('we refill ink') message displayed in a computer shop in the centre of Asmara (see Figure 6). Although the production qualities of these two examples clearly show differences, it is common to find printed signs with very low production qualities.



Figure 6: 'Riffil ink'



Figure 7: 'Look and know our world's different money'

4 *Linking classroom and public uses of English*

There are some important points to be made about the role of English in education and the public sphere. The prominent role given to the English language in the country's education policy is reflected in equally prominent visibility of English in the streets of Asmara. The global language of English has crept into every major domain of the day to day life of at least the urban citizens. Although the country does not recognize English (or any other language) as an official language, the use of English in formal (e.g., education, ministries, etc.) and informal settings (e.g., street signs) attests to its wide role and influence in the country.

Another link that needs further attention is the English curriculum. Research has shown that English proficiency in schools is very low (Walter & Davis, 2005). Officials at the Ministry of Education said that 'poor English' in the streets of Asmara is the result of the weak curriculum (Saleh Idris, personal communication, March 2009). To address this, the Ministry is currently revising the curriculum of elementary education. In the revised curriculum, English lessons will be offered from the very start of elementary schooling (starting in grade 1 instead of grade 2). The teaching materials and methods have been revised to incorporate learner-centred approaches.

The curriculum revisions may also benefit from a further examination of the social uses of English written language outside the school context. Research has shown that some students learn written language on their own independent of schools by reading signs, labels, names of streets and other print materials in their surrounding (Heath, 1986). The informal acquisition and use of literacy has to be acknowledged and further investigation has to be made on how it relates to the formal, school based acquisition of literacy. English language and literacy acquisition outside the schools might also be influenced by the ubiquitous presence of global cultural products conveyed through satellite television, the Internet, magazines, books, videos and DVDs. Educators and policy makers may need to make more explicit links between school and community-based literacy practices in order to raise the current low levels of learning achievement.

References

- Asfaha, Y.M., Kurvers, J., & Kroon, S. (2008). Literacy and script attitudes in multilingual Eritrea. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12, 2, 223-240.
- Blommaert, J. (2008). *Grassroots literacy: Writing, identity and voice in Central Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Collins, J., & Slembrouck, S. (2007). Reading shop windows in globalized neighborhoods: Multilingual literacy practices and indexicality. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 39, 3, 335-356.
- Department of Education (1991). *Declaration of policies on education in Eritrea by the provisional government*. Asmara, The Provisional Government of Eritrea.
- Juffermans, K. (2008). Local emplacement and global identities in signboard and billboard literacies in urban Gambia, In A. Simo Bobda (Ed.) *Explorations into language use in Africa* (pp. 197-219). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Hailemariam, C. (2002). *Language and education in Eritrea. A case study of language diversity, policy and practice*. Amsterdam: Aksant.

- Heath, S.B. (1986). The functions and uses of literacy. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, & K. Egan (Eds.) *Literacy, society, and schooling: A reader* (pp. 15-26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R.Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 16, 1*, 23-49.
- Shohamy, E., & Gorter, D. (Eds.) (2009). *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*. London: Routledge.
- Walter, S.L., & Davis, P.M. (2005). *The Eritrea national reading survey*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- Woldemikael, T. (2003). Language, education and public policy in Eritrea. *African Studies Review, 46*, 117-136.
- Wright, M.W. (2002). *Ideologies and methodologies in language and literacy instruction in postcolonial Eritrea*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.