Literacy use and acquisition in multilingual Eritrea

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Multilingual literacy use and acquisition in Eritrea

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1. Introduction

This study investigates literacy acquisition and use in different scripts in multilingual Eritrea, a Horn of Africa country. The research problem is approached from two major angles: the social use of literacy and the classroom acquisition of literacy which in turn includes assessment of literacy instructions, literacy skills and literacy learning processes. The social use of written language and the values attached to literacy and different scripts influence decisions in the acquisition of literacy and the functions assigned to it (Herbert and Robinson 2001). In smaller language communities, there is relatively lower motivation to learn to read and write in a language with limited reach and national status (Hailemariam 2002). Our research tries to compare social use and acquisition in multiple languages and scripts in the context of a complex language and script landscape in Eritrea.

Eritrea, a former Italian colony and British protectorate, was federated with Ethiopia after colonial rules ended in the early 1950s. The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie unilaterally dissolved the federation in 1961 prompting a war for independence. The war ended in 1991 with the rebel Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) forming a transitional government after a referendum in 1993. The educational policy of independent Eritrea, as many other policy areas, has a visible imprint of the independence struggle. As was the case in areas under EPLF control during the war, elementary schools still deliver education to their students in the children's mother tongues. By 2003, all nine languages of the country were in use as media of instruction in all elementary schools in the respective language communities. English is introduced early in elementary education in preparation for English medium instruction in middle schools and above. The compulsory basic education policy allows, members of a language group to send their children either to schools using their language as a medium of instruction or to other

schools using one of the two widely used languages, Tigrinya and Arabic. These and the rest of the languages use different orthographies originating from three different writing systems.

The Cushitic languages of Bilen, Bidhaawyeet, Saho, and Afar, and the Nilo-Saharan Kunama and Nara use orthographies based on the full Latin alphabet, while the Arabic language of the Rashaidas uses consonantal-alphabetic Arabic script. The Semitic languages of the two biggest groups, Tigriyna (50 percent) and Tigre (30 percent), have orthographies represented by the ancient syllabic script of Ge'ez. These scripts differ in how they represent units of language, in graphic form, and in orthographic complexity. The alphabetic writing system of Latin and Arabic scripts, for example, uses letters to represent phonemes, the smallest units of sound in speech, while the syllabic writing system of Ge'ez uses symbols representing a bigger unit, the syllable. The written histories of these nine languages are also different. Afar was first written in 1840, Tigre in 1889, Bilen in early 19th century, and both Kunama and Saho were first written one hundred years ago while Nara and Bidhaawyeet were written only in the last 20 years (Dutcher 1998). According to similar assessments by Dutcher (1998), Tigrinya (600 to 700 years) and Arabic (1000 years) have the longest written histories.

2. Literacy in Society

In Eritrea, within one national curriculum, different languages and scripts are taught. In addition to their application in schools, the languages and scripts are also in use in commerce, public broadcast media and in religious institutions. However, not all the languages and scripts are used in the same degree. The national print media use only Tigrinya, Arabic and English, while the government owned radio uses all the nine languages in broadcast. Names of public institutions and businesses (hotels, restaurants, etc) are written usually in Ge'ez, Arabic and Latin scripts. Throughout the country, most of the official written communications and other paperwork in major institutions are done through the use of Tigrinya language and Ge'ez script. The languages and scripts of the country are used in different degrees and, as a result of this use and other factors, people's opinions and attitudes towards these languages and scripts are shaped.

This is a study that looks at both the acquisition of reading and writing in different scripts in the classrooms of Eritrea and the social use of multilingual literacy outside the schools. A comparative study of literacy acquisition in different scripts in Eritrea, the social use of these different scripts, and the values people attach to them form the basis of the research design. The classroom investigations cover classroom acquisition and instruction of literacy, which are briefly described at the end. This report starts with

describing methodologies and preliminary results of the social use of literacy survey conducted in Eritrea.

2.1. Methodology

Through the use of survey, the social use of literacy study aims at answering the sociolinguistic and ethnographic questions that are important in the context of multilingual and multiscriptal societies: What are the functions and uses of literacy, and the values attached to literacy in Eritrea's nine languages and three scripts by the country's ethno-linguistic groups? Are there differences regarding the use of literacy between the different ethnic groups? How frequently are the different scripts used? In short, what are the different cultural practices associated with the used of the different scripts.

Many researchers have tried to answer similar literacy use questions through the use of ethnographic field research methods of observation (Heath 1983; Street 2000), coupled with in-depth interviews and photography (Barton 2001) and participants' diaries (Jones et al. 2000). This study, however, employs survey as the method appears feasible in assessing attitudes and uses of literacy among many language groups in multilingual Eritrea. As recommended by Herbert and Robinson (2001), in highlighting the importance of studying, through structured methods, the sociolinguistics of who uses which language and script with whom, Banda (2003) used a survey to study literacy practices of students at the University of Western Cape in South Africa.

Similarly, a sociolinguistic survey was used in Eritrea to consult 670 respondents, an average of 70 respondents from each language group. Sampling proceeded with enumeration of the main localities inhabited by each ethnic group. From this list of possible sites, clusters were randomly selected for each language group. Within a cluster (roughly corresponding to a town with an adjacent village), neighbourhoods, streets and households were randomly selected. Respondents came from both sexes, from **two** main religions in the country (Christianity and Islam), from rural and urban settings and with various occupations ranging from illiterate farmers to college educated civil servants. Around 60% are literates with educational level ranging from adult literacy classes to university degree. The sample, which only had 40% women, included respondents with an average age of 40 years. The majority of the respondents spoke more than two languages (71%) with some percentages of bilinguals (16%) and monolinguals (around 12%). The Tigrinya have the highest representation in the sample with 102 respondents while the Rashaida have the lowest with 42 respondents in the sample. About 72% of the respondents are Muslim while the rest are Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Protestants. The Kunama and the Bilen have substantial

percentages of Protestants, Catholics and Muslims, while the Tigrinya are predominantly Orthodox with the rest of the six ethnic groups having predominantly Muslim constituents.

Table 1: *The different language groups, their numbers in the sample, their share of the population (in percentages) and sample characteristics*

Group	N	Pop. (%)	Language	Script	Religion	Age M	SD	Schooling M	SD	Languages M	SD
Afar	61	6.0	Afar	Latin	Muslim	30.49	15.35	6.08	5.15	2.31	1.42
Bidhaawyeet	69	3.3	Bidhaaw	Latin	Muslim	41.20	14.69	3.52	4.62	2.41	1.14
Bilen	82	2.0	Bilen	Latin	Mus/Chri	40.35	16.45	5.02	5.29	2.63	1.11
Kunama	66	3.3	Kunama	Latin	Mus/Chri	35.42	17.01	4.89	4.79	2.06	1.18
Nara	73	2.0	Nara	Latin	Muslim	40.68	14.56	3.70	4.66	2.55	1.48
Rashaida	42	1.0	Arabic	Arabic	Muslim	44.55	19.87	1.19	2.44	1.10	0.30
Saho	80	5.4	Saho	Latin	Muslim	36.81	16.17	4.63	5.37	2.09	1.10
Tigre	95	27.0	Tigre	Ge'ez	Muslim	43.15	17.63	5.25	5.16	1.63	0.90
Tigrinya	102	50.0	Tigrinya	Ge'ez	Christ.	43.01	16.21	7.77	5.17	1.60	0.85
Total	670					39.73	16.76	4.97	5.17	2.06	1.19

The questionnaire used in the survey covered the following areas: (1) Background information of the participants, such as age, sex, education, profession, language(s), and literacy skills; (2) Literacy use, which addressed the main domains of daily life: work, family, leisure time, citizenship and religion; (3) Literacy values, opinions and preferences on scripts. The questionnaire was developed through different stages. After careful review of literature on literacy practices, a list of possible areas of interest was trimmed and modified by consulting personal knowledge of the language and culture of Eritrea. This list was used to create a number of open ended questions that were presented to 25 respondents back in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. Insights and responses to this questionnaire helped create a final instrument with more than 50 questions, the majority of which were closed ended only asking interviewees to agree or disagree with formulated arguments about literacy and the different scripts. A set of questions on the use of literacy asked for the frequency of use of reading and writing in the domains of work, home, leisure time, religious and civic occasions. Each contained a list of activities (developed from the initial probing in Asmara) that were read to respondents after they were given a chance to answer the questions

spontaneously. The questionnaire was prepared in Tigrinya and bilingual research assistants orally translated the content while simultaneously recording responses during an interview.

2.2. Analysis and Discussions

Separate factor analysis (reducing huge numbers of variables to identify hidden structures) on all response items in each of the domains of literacy use and on the attitudes on literacy/scripts parts produced patterns of literacy use and a list of arguments explaining script preferences and literacy values. The factor analysis (Principal Component Analysis with Promax Rotation) produced 10 factors with factor loadings (correlations between a variable and a factor) of 0.50 and above. The reliability (Cronbachés alpha) of the items on the factors varied from 0.71 to 0.93. Five factors emerged out of the analysis of literacy use questions while two factors explained the values people place on literacy. Three factors were identified in how people justify their script preferences.

Analysis of responses of 395 literates revealed that people use reading and writing in different social domains. The uses of literacy have the following five patterns: functional, entertainment, workplace, religious, and civic related literacy activities. Entertainment literacy mainly meant reading of newspapers and publicly displayed posters and announcements of cinematic events. The highest loading items in the entertainment factor are reading of newspaper announcement of future sport events and results of past games. Reading film/video subtitles, cinema entrance fees, reading covers of music CD's etc. follow sport related reading at the top of the entertainment factor. Reading of creative (novels) and other journalistic publications (magazines) appear in the lower part of a long list of literacy activities related to entertainment.

Table 2: *Frequency of use of work, entertainment, functional, religious, and citizenship literacy by literate members of the languages groups*

Group	N	Work		Entertainment		Functional		Religious		Citizenship		Total	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Afar	40	2.30	.89	2.38	.91	2.32	.80	1.99	.68	1.50	.41	2.08	.62
Bidhaa.	32	2.22	.67	1.99	.61	1.83	.50	2.01	.87	1.46	.40	1.86	.47
Bilen	45	1.81	.82	1.99	.86	2.05	.57	1.91	.68	1.43	.36	1.84	.52
Kunama	43	2.03	.90	1.62	.63	1.92	.62	1.94	.64	1.46	.39	1.76	.53
Nara	39	2.31	1.00	1.92	.93	1.84	.69	1.69	.48	1.37	.37	1.74	.58
Rashaida	11	2.15	1.62	1.65	.32	1.76	.53	1.66	.32	1.47	.77	1.64	.42
Saho	44	2.40	.64	1.67	.40	1.82	.34	1.67	.69	1.39	.27	1.71	.34
Tigre	60	1.73	.82	1.84	.76	1.97	.55	1.82	.58	1.42	.30	1.76	.46
Tigrinya	81	2.24	.92	2.07	.77	2.53	.65	1.95	.86	1.56	.38	2.06	.51
Total	395	2.08	.88	1.93	.77	2.08	.66	1.87	.70	1.46	.38	1.86	.52

What was termed as functional literacy mainly included writing and reading of names, telephone numbers and addresses on a notebook, reading notices in streets and buses (such as bus numbers or no smoking signs), and checking the yearly calendar. Writing of personal letters and reading the price tags in shops comes at the bottom (having lower loadings) of the functional use of literacy. Workplace literacy activities included reading order forms, instructions, and writing reports and singing in for work. In the religious literacy factor, the most prominent literacy activity relates to reading administrative postings of information about services and religious classes while reading of religious texts of the holy books appears at the bottom of the short list of items. Citizenship literacy activity included mainly reading and writing related to the bureaucracy of acquiring land and housing ownerships and the paperwork that is necessary to build or repair a house or to get electricity and water lines.

The factor analysis reduced the large number of literacy events into manageable list of factors. The next step was establishing the relative importance of these broad categories of literacy uses by looking at the frequency of use. Differences among the nine language groups were also investigated. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (daily), the highest frequency of literacy activity is witnessed in the functional and work related literacies (with mean frequency of 2.08) while the lowest in citizenship related literacy

activity (1.46). The differences in the mean frequency of literacy use between language groups is significant ($p < 0.001$) in the domains of workplace, entertainment and functional literacy, while those differences in the domains of religious and citizenship related literacy are not significant. The Tigrinya and Afar language groups show consistently higher mean frequencies of literacy activities in the workplace, entertainment and functional domains. These are among the language groups (together with Tigre and Bilen) with longer written histories that date back from 14th (Tigrinya) to early or late 19th century.

In assessing the values attached to literacy, 32 response items from 670 literate and illiterate respondents revealed two main arguments highlighting the importance of literacy. People value literacy for the intrinsic qualities that promise personal empowerment and for the economic benefits it generates. The first value of literacy, intrinsic value, explains how reading and writing helps one realise what is helpful or harmful to oneself and how it helps people gain knowledge. The items that load high on this factor indicate the value of literacy in creating a balanced and informed individual with necessary communication abilities to function properly in a society. The economic value people attach to literacy comes from its power to offer people employment opportunities and better incomes. People with literacy skills have better jobs, bigger income, and more confidence in themselves.

The language groups significantly differ in the way they weigh the intrinsic and economic values of literacy. The nomadic Rashaida and Bidhaawyeet, with still only a handful of mother tongue schools in their areas, put the highest value on literacy. While the language groups with relatively longer literary traditions have lower expectations out of the intrinsic and economic values of literacy. In general, all the groups put lower expectations on the economic value than the personal empowerment aspect of intrinsic value of literacy. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the mean total score value (by all language groups) on the intrinsic argument is 4.69 compared to 4.23 on the economic one.

Three separate patterns were identified in the factor analysis of the arguments that explained script preferences. Looking at the expressions of preferences, the Arabic script is by far the most popular among most of the language groups. Afar (52%), Bidhaawyeet (60%), Nara (60%), Saho (56%) and Tigre (52%) indicated Arabic as the most useful script. Substantial percentages of respondents in only four language groups remained loyal to the script of their own languages in their expressions of most useful script. About 47.5 percent Tigrinya respondents expressed preference for Ge'ez compared to 41 percent from Kunama and 48 percent from Bilen who preferred Latin. About 62 percent of the Rashaida chose Arabic. The rest of the respondents from the Tigrinya, Kunama, Bilen and Rashaida groups were roughly divided

between choosing one or the other of the remaining scripts. These preferences were explained by many arguments reduced, in the factor analysis, into ease, wider use and familiarity. People chose a specific script because it was comparatively easier to use or learn from the rest or because of its familiarity from earlier encounters or because of its perceived use in wider geographical areas and as such more meaningful to master for future use. These were the three arguments that were forwarded to explain script preferences.

These preferences are easily compared with the actual use of the scripts. Six languages have Latin-based orthographies used in the respective mother language medium schools in the different regions of the country. But only two language groups (Bilen and Kunama) show greater affinity to the Latin script with the rest of the six member group gravitating more towards the Arabic script. One of the frequently forwarded arguments was that Latin is barely used outside the classrooms in the country. It is not used in the public offices and there are no newspapers printed in any of the languages that have Latin-based orthography. However, Ge'ez and Arabic are the scripts of inter-group communication and commerce. The newspapers of the country are printed in Tigrinya (Ge'ez) and Arabic. Reported use of the scripts by respondents in the survey revealed a wide use of Ge'ez in all the domains of literacy use, followed by Arabic. Latin had the lowest reported use in the different functions of literacy.

2.3. Conclusions and Implications

Literacy is still highly valued in the different language communities in Eritrea. The ability to read and write is equated with better income, communication skills and even better self-image. However, people also seem realistic about the benefits literacy generates ("Better life is how hard you work and not because you can read and write.").

Groups differ significantly in how they use and view literacy. One obvious observation was that the values placed on literacy to a certain extent relate to length of literary tradition in a language group. Members of a language group with recent history of written language are, for example, more likely to place higher economic value on literacy than members of language groups with slightly longer traditions. The same history also shapes use of literacy in different domains. The larger groups, which usually have longer written history, engage more frequently in literacy activities. Most of the written atmosphere in the country is in the language and script of the larger language communities (Tigrinya and Tigre) and members of these communities find it easier to access written language as most of it is in Ge'ez. Although it was difficult to tease out the effect of religion in the literacy use and values analysis, educational level and ethnic identity play a role in explaining

differences in use, values and preferences. Ge'ez is viewed as a script with national reach while Latin is considered as a script of local importance with little application outside the classrooms. Arabic is seen as a script of a language with international status.

In conclusion, ethnic identity, wider use of one's script or language, and length of written history all shape the views and opinions of language communities. Therefore, groups differ in their frequency of use of literacy and in their views of their scripts, which in turn have different historical developments and applications and spread. How do these sociolinguistic realities of literacy and scripts relate to the classroom acquisition of literacy in different scripts? The survey of social use of literacy, we believe, has a role to play in understanding and explaining what goes on in literacy classes in multilingual Eritrea.

3. Literacy in Classrooms

According to the Basic Education Statistics of 2002/03 (Ministry of Education, 2003), elementary education was provided to 359,423 children in about 780 schools using all the nine languages as media of instruction. Textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education helped the delivery of literacy instruction in all languages all over Eritrea. Elementary education also incorporates science, mathematics and English language classes. By the end of grade 5, students must have learned at least two languages and two different scripts. Our ongoing comparative research tries to investigate how script differences affect the acquisition of literacy within one curriculum. The comparison also looks at literacy instruction.

Comparative literacy acquisition study within the same cultural and educational context is of interest, mainly, because of the differences in phonological status between the syllable (as in the Ge'ez script) and the phoneme (as in the alphabetic script). Getting access to the phoneme is a well-documented cognitive burden for many children learning to read an alphabetic script, and is considered the most important predictor of reading problems (Byrne, 1998; Goswami, 2000). Compared to alphabetic scripts, the cognitive prerequisites of learning a syllabic script have less been investigated, although this might be important in comparative literacy studies and in investigating reading problems (Geva, 1995). Little is known about the transfer in learning to read from one script to another, especially when the first script is syllabic. Eritrea offers an excellent case to compare the acquisition of literacy in a syllabic script (Ge'ez) with the acquisition of literacy in two different alphabetic scripts (full Latin alphabet and consonantal alphabetic), and to study the transition from acquiring a syllabic script to an alphabetic script (from Tigrinya to English, for example).

Currently, we are in the middle of executing the fieldwork that focuses on the comparisons of literacy acquisitions in syllabic Ge'ez with the full-alphabetic Latin and consonantal-alphabetic Arabic by studying instructions in five out of the nine Eritrean languages. A quasi-experimental field design compares results of literacy acquisition in the languages of Tigrinya and Tigre (with Ge'ez script), Saho and Kunama (with Latin script) and Arabic (with Arabic script). Oral and written tests will be administered in these five Eritrean languages and in English to randomly selected students in grade 1 and grade 4. The grade 1 tests compare results of instructions in three scripts and grade 4 tests will aid investigation of transfer of skills from literacy in first to second language. For the first script in grade 1, letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, word reading, sentence comprehension and spelling tests have already been prepared. The tests were translated from the original Tigrinya into Saho, Kunama, Tigre and Arabic and forward translators compared the tests in the target languages with that of the source language. All tests in five languages were then piloted in elementary schools that used the respective languages as media of instruction.

To assess word decoding ability in grade 1, for each of the languages, a list of words was constructed out of the pool of words that were already in the curriculum, i.e. the textbooks of the same grade level and partly from higher grades. To assess comprehension, a sentence comprehension task where students matched a picture with the right alternative from three sentences was provided. The spelling test consisted of 20 words selected following similar procedures as in the word decoding test. To assess letter and phonemic awareness, tests were borrowed from a 2002 national reading survey in schools, sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Eritrea. The reading survey, conducted with the supervision of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, included most of the Eritrean languages and English. In the current project, there are five languages per three scripts because additional languages were included when possible to minimise the effect of language differences. Thus Tigrinya and Tigre represented the Ge'ez script while Kunama and Saho the Latin script. There are no other languages (apart from Arabic) that employ Arabic-based orthographies in Eritrea.

The grade 4 mother tongue and English languages instruments are reading comprehension tests that will be group administered to students. Similar procedures of translation were followed to produce an adaptation in five Eritrean languages of the grade 4 reading comprehension test that was mainly based on a reading passage from IEA's (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) PIRLS 2001 reading assessment. The grade 4 mother tongue tests also included the same word decoding list used in grade 1. The English reading comprehension test was the one used by the Ministry of Education in the 2002 national reading survey.

To assess literacy instruction, a series of in-depth interviews with key-informants will be combined with document analysis. In the interviews, various specialists in language and literacy instruction of all the languages will be consulted about theoretical and practical aspects of the teaching, learning and evaluation of literacy in different languages and scripts. The document analysis includes official printed materials of educational authorities, literacy textbooks and research reports. The outcomes of key-informant interviews and document analysis provide a theoretical and practical picture of multiple script instruction in multilingual Eritrea.

4. Literacy Use and Acquisition

The outcomes of the tests in five languages and three scripts will shed light on the theoretical and practical significance of investigating differences in acquisition of literacy in orthographies using syllabic and alphabetic writing systems. Although multiple script literacy in Eritrea is acquired within one national curriculum, literacy is not homogenously used and valued by the country's different language groups. The socio-cultural knowledge about the different literacy practices of citizens in Eritrea can be considered crucial for valid interpretations of the educational-linguistic literacy acquisition outcomes of the classroom based investigations. This double-edged investigation into classroom acquisition and social use of literacy partly answers calls for middle ground in the theoretical debate of literacy as a socio-cultural and literacy as a technological skill perspectives (Van Enk et al. 2005).

As Eritrea is revising its primary school curriculum, the project can make empirically based contributions to optimal arrangements for literacy acquisition in the Eritrean multilingual context. This includes discussions regarding the languages and scripts involved, the manner and order of teaching and learning literacy in different languages and scripts, and the development of literacy teaching curricula, materials, methodologies, evaluation procedures and tests. The project could, at a more practical level, also contribute to the development and improvement of teacher training materials and programs in the field of literacy acquisitions, to the improvement of literacy teaching, both to children and adults in regular classrooms and adult literacy programs, and to the production of relevant reading materials and intervention programs for use in and outside classrooms.

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