



RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

M.Ed. In TESL Program Language Group Specific Informational Reports

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Language Group: Amharic
Author: Susan Russell

Program Contact Person: Nancy Cloud (ncloud@ric.edu)



Amharic
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TESL 539: Language Group Report

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Susan Russell

Amharic

- National language of Ethiopia
- Been a written language for at least 500 years
- 17.4 million first language speakers worldwide –
- Estimated another 5 million 2nd language speakers
- 50th most widely spoken language in the world
- 17 million in Ethiopia and
400,000 in other countries –

<http://www.joshuaproject.net/languages.php?rol3=amh>

- 2nd most spoken Semitic language after Arabic
- Key Dialects: Gondar Amharic, Gojam Amharic, and Shoa Amharic (standard written and spoken Amharic).
- No major variations among dialects, if so very easy to understand



<http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/africa/et.htm>

History

In the mid-ninth century A.D., a region of Africa was recognized by the world as Amhara. This region had been built over nine hundred years by a Semitic-speaking group in the current-day Ethiopia and Eritrea region. The inhabitants spoke a language that had been removed from the classical language of the Aksum Empire and Medieval Ethiopian. A diglossic situation occurred in this area. In Amhara, the rulers were speaking the Semitic out of Aksum. Since the military forces were created from different ethnic groups, they spoke in a Creole in order to be able to communicate with each other. The peasants in this area were also speaking in a Creole. As the military began to go out and conquer, their Creole started to spread, in variations. The Creole eventually displaced the standard Semitic language to become the national language of Ethiopia. It became first recognized as a national language in the fourteenth century when songs were created to praise the kings in this language.

Writing System

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/amharic.htm>

http://ethiopia.limbo13.com/index.php/first_symbol/



Amharic	Issues this may cause for an English learner
Written in a style of script known as the Ge'ez alphabet	No translation into English alphabet
Comprised of 7 vowels and 31 consonants that are always combined including a set of ejectives that have sounds not in the English language	No independent vowels in Amharic – English learner may have trouble with words that vowel based. There are symbols for every sound in Amharic, whereas in English two letters can have same sounds “j” and “g” – may misuse letters
Own number system	Have to learn new alphabet and new number system
Own punctuation system – There are colon-like symbols between words and double colon-like symbols at the end of sentences in Amharic, the question mark is three dots and an exclamation mark is three dots within parentheses	May create errors in punctuating, omissions or avoidance of including punctuation for fear of using wrong symbol
No distinction between capital and lower case letters	Proper nouns and start of sentences may not be capitalized

Communication Style

Ethiopian communication style	Problems this could cause for an Ethiopian or Amharic speaker learning English
•Ethiopians speak in soft tones, loud voices appear aggressive and to show anger	May be perceived as being shy or meek
•Eye contact is a sign of respect	Also standard for English speakers
•Raising an eyebrow can be considered a sign of “yes” and shrugging a shoulder can be a sign of “no”	May experience miscommunication if an English speaker happens to use this body language
•Pitch and stress are used in all words and phrases and words can have a different syllabic stress depending on usage	They may place too much stress on words or phrases in English or use pitch and stress where they do not belong
•Ethiopians pride themselves on their eloquent speaking style and expect others to speak clearly and use figurative language	They may be perceived as using flowery or dramatic language
•A greeting encounter is an art in oral communication and can go back and forth for several turns, are highly involved, and always indicate the age and status of participants – elders are always respected	May be considered to talkative or not able to get to the point
•Not uncommon for members of the same and opposite sex to kiss and hold hands and does not necessarily indicate romantic feelings	May be perceived as romantically involved or making a pass at the person they are speaking with

Phonemes - Consonants

- In Amharic, there is a written representation for each phoneme (for example – sh) whereas in English the same letter can have multiple sounds (example “g” giant and great)
- English learners may have difficulty with consonant clusters and include an extra vowel sound or add syllables
- There are some sounds that are unique to Amharic but the letter translation looks like a completely different English sound. This could cause an Amharic speaker to mispronounce letters and sounds using interlingual transfer.



CH	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Close your teeth2) Press your tongue to your upper inside part of your mouth3) Force the air just from the teeth outward to make the sound “Ch”
GN	As in onion
J	As in Pleasure or the French “Je”
Q	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Compress an air between your tongue and you’re inside upper mouth while your mouth is open2) Release the air by forcing it to bounce against your inside upper mouth while making the sound associated with “Q”
P	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Press your lips tighter2) Force the air just from the lips outward to make the sound “P”, soon followed by the modifying vowels
T	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Close your teeth2) Put your tongue against your inside upper mouth3) Force the air just from the teeth outward to make the sound “T”4) Finally open your mouth to voice the vowel sound.

Phonemes - Vowels

- In English, the same vowel can have different sounds and different vowels can have the same sound which could be confusing for an Amharic speaker. For example way and weigh and body and row.
- In Amharic some of the vowel symbols do not sound the same as the same vowel symbol in English.
- There are English vowel sounds that do not exist in Amharic that a English learner would have to learn to form the sound and pronounce. They may also have difficulty distinguishing between words that have the unfamiliar vowel sound such as “cold” and “cod”. They may use interlingual transfer to try and come up with a sound for the unfamiliar vowel.

- Amharic vowels:

a- as in 'momma'

e-as in 'chicken'

i-as in 'bit'

ai-as in 'bit'

The following vowel sounds are short:

e-as in 'her' but cut the 'e' short before the 'r'

ea-as in 'get'

o-as in 'hot'

u-as in 'flute' but shorter

The following are long vowel sounds:

ie-as in 'pie'

o-a cross between 'coat' and 'caught'

English vowels that are missing in Amharic:

/i/ bead, need, happy

/ɔɪ/ boy, boil

/e/ bait, bay

/ʊ/ book, put, poor

aw/ bound, how

/o/ boat, wrote, old

Morphology

- Amharic is a consonant root-based language with vowels added on to the consonants
- Morphemes can be added as articles, prepositions, personal pronouns, numbers, conjunctions and most adjectives – an English learner would have to learn the order of how these words appear in a sentence as well as the words themselves
- Can be used to show agreement with verbs
- Can be used to show possession with nouns
- Can be used to denote a formality – In English there is no separation of language used to express formality, an Amharic speaker will need to learn to use body language and tone to express formality

Sentence Order

Amharic	Errors this may cause an English learner	Example
In Amharic, the verb goes at the end of the sentence and the order is subject/object/verb (SOV) whereas in English the word order is usually subject/verb/object (SVO).	Amharic speakers may reverse word order when speaking in English	Instead of “I am a student” might say - “I student am”
Amharic sentences are short in the number of words they contain because they have so many prefixes and suffixes	English learners may be hesitant to write sentences at length	They may leave out pieces of information which provide clarity or details. There may not be enough detail in their writing at first
if it is a yes or no question, the sentence order stays the same but the intonation is that of a question – no question word used	May not include a question word, making it unclear to the audience if it is a statement or questions	Instead of “Do you want another piece?” Might say “You want another piece.”
if not, the question word is inserted right before the verb	May place the question word in the wrong place	“That student who is?”

Nouns and Pronouns

Amharic	Issues this could cause an English learner
<p>Nouns are created depending on many variables - gender (masculine/feminine), plural or singular, informal or formal, possession etc. To form the different combinations, suffixes are added to the root of the nouns</p>	<p>This could cause an English learner to add prefixes and suffixes to a noun that do not belong.</p>
<p>Personal pronouns are omitted</p>	<p>May omit them in English as well</p>
<p>Nouns are all masculine or feminine. The suffix changes depending on gender. For example a horse would have a different suffix depending on it's sex. If the sex is not known, the speaker knows that some animals are referred to as male and some are female. Some objects are either male or female, for example a drum is always masculine</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>If you are speaking to a male, words end in a "h" sound and when speaking to a female, words end in a "sh" sound Example – "good day" is the same for a male or female in English but in Amharic "den a deh" and "den a desh"</p>	<p>May change an ending to a word depending if they are speaking to a male or a female</p>
<p>Plurals are formed adding "woč" or "oč" (if the word ends in a vowel or a consonant) to the noun.</p>	<p>An English learner would need to learn the plural rules in English which are much more complicated. This may cause overgeneralization of the English plural rules at first</p>

Articles

Amharic	Issues this could cause an English learner
if a noun is definite or "specified" the article is expressed by a suffix.	In English we would say, "I want that cat," specifying which cat we want. In Amharic, the "that" would be a suffix to the noun. This could cause an English learner to possibly place the article after the noun instead of in front of the noun as we do in English.
If the noun is indefinite, there is no article used	An English learner may omit the indefinite article

Verbs

An Amharic verb root consists of a set of (usually three) consonants

A verb form normally has one or more suffixes and prefixes added to create verb forms

Verbs always agree with their subjects

Verbs are marked for person, number, and gender

A verb form can also agree with the the direct or indirect object of the verb.

- məkkeɾɛŋ 'he advised me'
- məkkeɾɛš 'he advised you: feminine'
- məkkeɾɛ 'he advised'

Are no helping verbs or two word verbs in Amharic.

- This could cause difficulty for an English learner. Parts of a verb phrase or a helping verb may be omitted.

The verb “to be”

- There are two different verbs for “to be” depending if the speaker is talking about existence or place, something that doesn't happen in English because we use the same verb to be to refer to either of these.

Adjectives

Amharic	Issues this may cause an English learner	Examples
Amharic has few primary adjectives	An English learner would have to learn new vocabulary without learning through translation	
Adjectives can stand alone but are mostly added as a suffix to the noun	An English learner might place an adjective after the noun	“The cat big” “The house first”

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M.Ed. in TESL Program
Nancy Cloud, Director
Educational Studies Department
Rhode Island College, HBS 206 #5
600 Mt. Pleasant Avenue
Providence, RI 02908
Phone (401) 456-8789
Fax (401) 456-8284
ncloud@ric.edu

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is Nationally Recognized by TESOL and NCATE



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