

Blin Language teaching in Sweden- Possibilities and problems Experiences from Sweden

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The paper's title is, "Blin language teaching-Possibilities and Problems
Experiences from Sweden. "

The topic can be included under the theme- "Mother Tongue Education in the Diaspora and back home."

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1. Introduction

During the year 1980 many Eritrean Blin linguistic groups sought asylum in Sweden. In 1985, there were more than 100 Blin in Stockholm city only, since then the number increased and today there are more than 1000 Eritrean Blin natives in Sweden bearing Swedish nationality.

During the year 1985 the Eritrean Blin debated and discussed about how they could preserve their language and culture in Sweden. In 1987, the community was born and has finally brought some good news about the Blin Language teaching in Sweden. The author of this paper himself was the first Blin Language teacher in Stockholm. Since then, some Blin teaching materials have been collected most of them in manuscript.

Teaching Blin language for the children with Blin mother tongue is one of the instruments used to keep the language alive. Blin language teaching in Sweden despite all difficulties still is running with a degree of optimism fostering the transference of the language to the next generation.

Will the Blin Community in diaspora and inside Eritrea embark on a path of lifting up their language from the situation it is now? Is the question that concerns all Blin people today.

Teaching a language without a written literature is not the same as teaching a language already with written literature. Developing a language as an education and administration medium is not without challenges. Organizing this work has taken many years. In 1987, the Blin Cultural Association was established officially in Sweden, this was a great achievement that has laid

foundation for mother language teaching in Sweden. Blin is the language spoken by the Blin people in Eritrea and Diaspora. The paper will focus on the mother language teaching experience in Sweden. Blin language teaching has started without books and was one of the languages called bookless languages in Sweden. The purpose of this paper is not only to highlight the problems of teaching but also learning a language. To enable us to do this, we approached the issue of teaching in combination with learning a language from the various perspectives. We asked the parents and others with long experience working with mother tongue teaching in Sweden, their personal reflections and ideas about learning a language for the first time. The contributors were parents and other members of the Blin Community in Sweden. Starting Blin Language teaching in Sweden was not without difficulties. To pick some of them seem important at this time.

- political constraints
- identity crisis
- internal problems
- organization of the teaching
- lack of teaching material

The outline of the paper is as follows:-

The role of the Blin Cultural Association, the role of the parents, the factors making the teaching difficult, remarks and conclusion and appendix accounting some current Blin Language Schools, number of students and the staff teaching the Blin Language in their territory.

2. The role of the Blin Cultural Association

Pursuing knowledge, either it is language teaching or other subjects, is not only achieved by sending your child to the school. The school is one source of many others. The Blin Cultural Association in Sweden was one of the main promoters of Blin language teaching in Sweden. The first aim of the association was to teach the children their mother tongue. Over the past ten years, the association has been working on the advance of Blin language teaching. There are many reasons for this.

For us the most important was keeping your ethnic identity and defying all discriminations against minor languages in Eritrea. The other important factor is the respect and preserving of your ethnic identity regardless wherever you live in the world.

The Blin language is not minor in Eritrea in comparing it with other Eritrean languages. There are, today, more than 150000 Blin natives speaking Blin Language in Eritrea, more than 30000 in Sudan and not less than 10000 in Europe, USA, Canada, and Australia.

The Blin Cultural Association in Sweden was an institutional variant working out Blin language teaching policies in Sweden. It has been expert in its level in analysing the socio-lingual position of the Blin language, and organizing language teaching in Sweden. Analysing the Blin socio-lingual position and organizing language teachings were important to start Blin language teaching in Sweden.

In the early stages of mapping out to teach Blin language, the association members have researched the needs, examined the patterns of language behaviour, attitudes within the Blin language teaching and its role as an identity element. The Association has played the guiding role by organizing public debates, encouraged the (Belain in Sweden to speak and teach their children in Blin. The Association served as permanent resource of Blin language teaching in Sweden.

3. The Role of the Parents

Parents are language bearers and transfers to their children. Speaking your language with your children at home is the first necessity of every parent before sending its child to the school. If the parents don't speak with their children at home, then it is difficult to teach the child his language, because this can influence the child when he/ she will attend Blin language teaching classes in the schools in Sweden. The children are not motivated to go to classes for learning their mother tongues; they feel alienated from others and are not proud of learning their language.

Parents are the main participants that have the responsibility of bringing up and educating their children, thus parents work as a link between their children and the school.

Parents guide their children to knowledge about their culture and the society around them. How was the role of the Blin parents in teaching their language to their children? In the initial period, it was difficult to convince the parents to stimulate their children to go the Blin classes in their respective schools. Some Blin parents were themselves not speaking their languages at home with their children.

If the Blin language is to develop as written language, it must first be spoken and exercised by its natives. Language is one of the elements of identity. Preserving your language by speaking and developing it to a higher level is the responsibility of the owner and cannot be enforced by policy makers.

Blin parents living in Sweden cooperated with the Swedish institutions and the Swedish authorities to get permission and assistance to teach their children in the schools of Sweden. Their role was important in maintaining the language teaching and transferring it to the next generation in diaspora.

Teaching a mother tongue is a citizens right, where all concerned by their cultural identity participate and try bring their concerns and issues. The parents and their association has been a platform providing guidelines to achieve the objectives of language teaching in Sweden.

4. Factors Making the Blin Language Teaching Difficult

I would like to shed light my own experiences that influenced the teaching of Blin Language in Sweden. To pick out the factors that seem prominent at this conference can help us to face them if they can happen in other places.

- **Political constraints:-** Blin Language teaching has been continuously subjected to strong political pressures trying to influence what should be done, how is the language be written- either in the Geez alphabets or Latin alphabets. The issue of pedagogy and policy making were not compatible. Policy makers were both pedagogues and experts of the language teaching. Policy makers should first study the wish of the broad Blin Society about their language and other cultural values. The policy should not work against the major objectives of that society. Why were these pressures put to the Blin Community in particular why the others were given free to choose their own? However, when such pressures become too strong and incompatible objectives are being introduced, then the result is confusion. A case in point is the current Blin language teaching in Eritrea- using alphabets that has never well studied by the native academics and pedagogues.

Therefore, Policies that are taken without the support of the identity owner will eventually have negative impact on the effectiveness of the teaching.

- **Identity crises:-**The experience of the author of this paper is that barriers to learn your mother tongue can also come from the self-esteem and pride one feels on his identity. The fate of language depends on the self-esteem and pride. The Blin speaking people because of many pressures and their living situation lost their mother tongue and identity. For them, teaching their children Blin language has no importance and is better to learn the dominant language and gain certain social career benefits.
- **Internal Problems:-** Language is a core issue in the politics of ethnicity at this time. From diasporic perspective, retaining and preserving your identity or language for the Blin ethnicity either Moslem or Christian is not significant. What matters the Blin is religion. Language and religion are not similar. Language is a medium and religion is a belief. Language comes first before religion. Religion is universal while language is unique. One cannot be a Moslem and Christian at the same time, but one can speak Blin either he is a Moslem or christen. The Blin ethnicity is composed of Moslems and Christians. Both of them are highly influenced by religion. The Moslems use the Arabic language as their mother tongue and the Christians use Tigrinya. The influence of religion on the Blin Language has been a main internal problem to retain their language and identity. The author of this paper recommends the London conference to provide some spheres where both the Moslem and Christian Blin resolve this issue.
- **Organization of language teaching:-** When the Blin community in Sweden explored the need of mother tongue teaching in Sweden, tried to implement the teaching without well organized staff and programme. Language teaching needs organization and board of permanence. When the Swedish Cultural and Educational authority allowed us to teach our children their mothers tongue. Lack of organization, staff and programme in the initial period couldn't help us to go forward. The relationship with the authority was weak. The participation of the Blin residents in each municipality was not active and organized to continue their commitments to teach their children in the schools. There was lack of teachers. When the municipalities in Sweden introduced a new law on teaching mother tongue in schools, the Blin Community children could not continue on their own because lack of financing. The Teaching by municipalities was ceased and every

thing was dependent on the association. The association lack still effective organization and staff for teaching Blin language in Sweden. Compared to the past situation, there is nowadays a teacher professionally capable, and the association has restarted in the year, 2004 the teaching in cooperation with ABF. (Arbetare bildningsförbund= Workers education union)

- **Lack of teaching material:-** Another factor is the lack of availability of Blin language teaching literatures. At the time, when we started teaching the Blin Language, it was just without any literature except some manuscripts. This non-availability of pedagogic literature added to the problem of teaching. Teaching children without literature is not easy. The parents and the teaching staff started to collect every material available to facilitate the teaching. Many have contributed by collecting primary teaching manuscripts in Blin. In sum, it was difficult, but not impossible to start a mother language teaching without literature.

5. Remarks and conclusions

The paper has presented accounts from the mother tongue teaching experience in Sweden and some difficulties associated with the teaching language in diaspora. The paper points the major obstacles that prevents teaching Blin mother tongue in diaspora. For effective and implementation of teaching a language need however the support of parents, associations and must have well organized staff and programmes of teaching.

An understanding of the obstacles that make teaching and retaining your identity impossible requires strategies to address them. The Blin associations can improve the teaching of mother tongue by welcoming the initiative as symbol of retaining their language and identity. The Blin Cultural Association and the parents if they value the process can encourage and participate in its production

It was the relentless efforts of the Blin Association that provided the continuity of Blin language teaching in Sweden. Policy makers can only facilitate such cultural development works by b providing them with suitable environments in which the teaching can occur. Thanks to the democratic policies of Sweden, today, the Blin has a place in the Swedish cultural life. The Blin Cultural Association in Sweden was a forerunner in this field of teaching mother tongue before it started inside Eritrea.

6. Refernces

1. Esman, Milton J. 1992. "The state and language policy", International Political science Review, Vol 13 , no. 4. pp. 381-396
2. Van Dyke, Vernon.1985. Human rights, Ethnicity, and Discrimination. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press
3. Fishman, Joshua A. 1989. Language and ethnicity in minority sociolinguistic perspective. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
4. Lijphart, Arend. 1977. Democracy in plural societies. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

5. Horowitz, Donald L. 1985. Ethnic Groups in conflict: Berkley, CA: University of Californian Press.

6. Appendix: Recent initiatives- Blin Language teaching Schools in Eritrea

Today, there are 276 Blin language teachers, 30 schools; there are a total of 9000 students both male and female. There are 10 elementary schools teaching Blin Language in the district of Elabered. There are 8 schools in the district of Hagad. In the district of Halhal , there are three schools. In the district of Hamelmalo, there are 4 schools. In Keren, there are 5 schools teaching Blin language. (Source: Education Department 2004, Government of Eritrea)

The main objective of Blin Language teaching is to ensure equal rights but this equality should be achieved in a manner compatible with the wishes of the people. (see article 2 of the ICCPR= International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) The participation of the Blin Population in decision making is another main thing to be considered.

Today, there is a special emphasis on the rights of ethnicities in the world to practice and develop their culture. States are required to take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture. (See article 4 of ICCPR)

States shall “protect the existence and national or ethnic, cultural and religious identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity”. (UN, General Assembly, 1992, article 1)

States are required to “appropriate measures so that, whenever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue”. (UN, General Assembly 1992, article 3)