

Fact sheet – The influences of prior learning

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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The issues

Learners from Iraq and the Horn of Africa may have had educational experiences in their first culture that are very different from current practice in Australia today. This fact sheet outlines some of the traditions of literacy and schooling that may influence how clients from these groups approach learning in AMEP classrooms.

The extent of prior schooling among these groups

Table 1 shows the extent to which clients from these groups have had schooling prior to their arrival in Australia.

Table 1: Extent of previous literacy and primary schooling among target groups¹

| Country | Literacy | | Primary schooling (% of population) |
|----------|----------|-----------|--|
| | Male | Female | |
| Eritrea | 66% | 39% | 31% |
| Ethiopia | 43% | 32% | 28% |
| Somalia | 36% | 14% (est) | 9% |
| Sudan | 69% | 45% | 51% |
| Iraq | 71% | 45% | 93% |

As can be seen from Table 1, although rates of literacy and primary schooling are low among the target groups, males are more likely to be literate and therefore to have had experience of school. Although a generous definition of literacy has been used, it is clear that more than half the populations of Sudan and Iraq experience some kind of formal education, while the population of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia are much less likely to have been to school. However, since all these areas have experienced serious conflict in recent years, these figures are not totally reliable.

Table 2: Schooling background of AMEP clients from the target groups

| | Horn of Africa | Iraq |
|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| No data available | 2.1% | 2.4% |
| No schooling | 7.4% | 1.8% |
| 1–7 years | 19.2% | 21.1% |
| 8–10 years | 20.3% | 23.9% |
| 11–12 years | 49.3% | 47.8% |
| 13+ years | 1.5% | 3% |
| TOTAL | 100% | 100% |

As Table 2 shows, the majority of AMEP clients from the target groups have had some schooling. For both groups, nearly half have had 11–12 years of schooling, and many have had 8–10 years. However, it should be noted that, in comparison with Iraq, a larger percentage of clients from the Horn of Africa have had no schooling (7.4% compared with 1.8%).

Goals for schooling

It is important to note that the goals for schooling set by different societies can be very diverse. For example, while State schools in Australia are not allowed to teach religion, in contrast, the first two of the five major purposes of Sudanese education, as stipulated in the law, are:

- 1 The consolidation of the religious doctrine.
- 2 The establishment of an independent society, and the trust in God and in self-reliance.

(UNESCO: The EFA 2000 Assessment Country Reports for Sudan)

Thus, clients may have had a very different kind of schooling in their country of origin. They may also have expectations – about the moral role of teachers, the nature of language and literacy, and

how applicable the skills learned in school are to everyday life – that differ from the goals of the AMEP.

The cultural context of schooling in Iraq and the Horn of Africa

Much of the Middle East and Northern Africa have a very long and strong Islamic tradition, and the Koran and its study in the Arabic language have played a crucial role. Central to the maintenance of this tradition has been the Koranic school. Even in those countries with strong Christian or Judaic communities, such as Ethiopia (where 50% of the population are Muslim), approaches to education have been greatly influenced by the values and pedagogy found in Koranic schools.

Koranic schools

Koranic schools range from large, well-resourced seats of learning in the cities, to poor, one-room, single-teacher institutions which may be the only source of education for rural communities. As with any system of education, there is a wide variety in the type of knowledge and skills offered in different schools. However, all share the crucial goal of teaching children the word of God as it is written in the Koran.

The Koran was given orally to the Prophet Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel. Muhammad, who could not read or write, recited the Koran by heart to his companions, and it was transmitted in oral form until it was written down some years later. The Koran is considered to be the most pure and beautiful form of classical Arabic, and is regarded as immutable, so that it may not be changed or translated. This has had several consequences for education in Koranic schools.

Firstly, the Koran can only be studied in Arabic, which is often remote from the language of the home, not only in the Horn of Africa where many different languages are spoken, but also in Iraq, where other varieties of Arabic are used for everyday communication. Moreover, because of its sacred nature, the Koran cannot be simplified or modified for pedagogical purposes as we might with any other foreign language text, but must be learned in its original written form in the manner of poetry. Where Koranic schools are the only source of education, children may only learn religious literacy and not a literacy that is functional for everyday living, and this in a language which is not their home language. They may view the products of formal learning in school as of limited applicability to their everyday life.

The Koran is also highly abstract and metaphorical. Comprehension is challenging. As the word of God, correct interpretation by an expert is required, but

the appropriate phrasing and pronunciation of the text are not always evident in the written classical Arabic text. Thus, study must be guided by an expert who knows how the text should be read and can provide the necessary oral models. The teacher in a Koranic school should therefore be a master of Islamic jurisprudence, although levels of expertise may range from barely literate with limited religious training in the countryside to expert scholar in the city. This teacher is therefore traditionally regarded as the expert who must supply the ‘right’ answer.

Recitation of the Koran is an integral part of Muslim prayer and ritual, and memorisation of the text is a traditional cornerstone of the faith. This means that the ability to recite from the Koran verbatim from memory is highly prized, and the rote learning and recitation of large sections of the Koran are considered to be an essential part of study. However, critics argue that while this approach to pedagogy emphasises the development of a child’s memory, it also encourages the habit of learning without understanding, and comes at the expense of the development of the imagination.

(For a more detailed discussion of the educational systems in Iraq and the Horn of Africa, see the relevant AMEP Country profiles fact sheet.)

Possible impact on expectations of learning English

Such early educational experiences may influence learners’ expectations of the nature of language and literacy, and of what a teacher and a student should do in the classroom. There may be an expectation that the teacher will be a moral model who provides the correct answer, explains everything and directs learning very closely. They may expect to rote-learn and reproduce language they have been told is correct, rather than deduce patterns and use language for communication. In addition, the focus on everyday language in AMEP classes may seem unfamiliar and even inappropriate to those for whom emphasis has previously been on poetry and the immutable word of God.

What the teacher can do

Be aware that:

- student expectations of the teacher may extend to moral attitudes in everyday life
- students expect the teacher to be the expert and to act like one.

Understand that:

- students may need to be given clear models and constant feedback on accuracy

- students' implicit views of language learning may differ from yours
- students may need a slow introduction to more communicative methods of language learning
- students may need explicit help in making the connection between the language they are learning and life outside the classroom
- students may appreciate some attention to poetry.

Annotated bibliography

Bloch, M 1993. The uses of schooling and literacy in a Zafimaniry village. In B Street (ed). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 87–109

This chapter describes the impact of schooling in one remote community. It is provocative in its exploration of how the knowledge that is acquired in school may be seen as a good thing to have by the community, but may be viewed at the same time as irrelevant to the structures of knowledge that really counts in everyday life. This is a useful reminder of how a learner's prior experience of schooling may not have been as relevant to everyday life as we try to make language learning experiences in the AMEP.

CIA – The World Factbook website:

<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/indexgeo.html>

This site presents a brief overview of facts and figures on a wide range of countries, and seems to have some of the most up-to-date facts and figures.

Graff, H 1993. The legacies of literacy. In J Maybin (ed). *Language and Literacy in social practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters and The Open University

This chapter discusses different geographical and historical conceptualisations of literacy.

Kiros, F R 1990. *Implementing educational policies in Ethiopia*. Washington DC: World Bank

This short book provides a detailed analysis of how education in Ethiopia developed in the seventies and eighties. It provides accounts of the great increase in political will to help a nation become literate, but also provides evidence of how the infrastructure of the country has been unable to deal with the demand that has been created.

Leong, C K and B S Randhawa (eds) 1989. *Understanding literacy and cognition*. New York: Plenum Press

This collection of academic essays on the relationship between literacy and thought provides in-depth analysis of some of the issues involved in schooling and literacy. They provide a background to the issue of the impact of schooling rather than a direct examination of these client groups.

Lewis, I M 1993. Literacy and cultural identity in the Horn of Africa: the Somali case. In B Street (ed). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 143–55

This chapter provides a fascinating review of the role of literacy development in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. It is particularly interesting for the insights it provides into the way in which literacy relates to the self-image of a people, and how it may be more important in this respect for some cultures than for others.

National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition 1992. *Country education profiles: Iraq*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service

This profile provides an overview of the education system in Iraq, giving some historical detail and a full description of recent educational options for Iraqis.

Spolsky, B 1986. 'Avoiding the tyranny of the written word: the development of the mediated mode of Jewish literacy'. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 9, 2: 23-37

Although this reference is rather old and deals with Jewish rather than Islamic religious texts, the parallels between the way in which written and spoken religious texts have developed and are currently viewed in the two great religions are nevertheless striking. The notion he discusses of 'mediated literacy' is helpful in understanding how learners with religious literacy may have a different relationship with the texts they are reading than do learners with a background of functional literacy.

Street, B V 1993. Cross-cultural perspectives on literacy. In J Maybin (ed). *Language and literacy in social practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters and The Open University

This chapter provides a useful reminder that definitions of literacy and what being literate means varies across cultures.

UNESCO – The EFA 2000 Assessment Country Reports website:
<http://www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/home.html>

Education for All country reports have been compiled by national assessment teams in a number of countries under the auspices of UNESCO. These outline the progress made towards education for all in each country, and also pinpoint shortcomings. Some of these may be influenced by the desire to present educational initiatives in certain countries in a positive light.

Wagner, D A 1993. *Literacy, culture and development: Becoming literate in Morocco*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Although this book is essentially a report on schools and literacy in Morocco, it provides a detailed analysis of literacy in a developing, Arab-speaking nation and, as such, has much to offer in terms of understanding these issues for other AMEP clients from the Middle East and North Africa.

World Bank Country Profiles website:
<http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/regions.html>

These profiles contain useful data on the countries in the Horn of Africa, but there is no profile for Iraq. Some of the information here seems more recent than on other country profile sites listed, but it is still necessary to trawl a range of sites to get a full profile of any country as some data is missing.

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- 1 Reporting on rates for literacy and primary enrolment in countries where there have been conflicts and thus massive population displacement is problematic, and the figures given here should serve as a rough guide only. They were taken from 1999 World Bank country profiles, except for Iraq for which none were available on this site. They were calculated as percentage of population over 15, and a very basic functional definition of literacy appears to have been used. The literacy figures for Iraq were taken from CIA country profiles (1995). The figures for primary enrolment for Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan were taken from the World Bank and relate to 1995. For Iraq and Somalia, the figures were taken from a Unesco report on achievements on *Education for All* (see Annotated Bibliography).