

**Using bilingual, bicultural expertise to reduce inequity  
and build literacy skills in refugee communities:  
TELLS generic bilingual picture dictionary project**

Presented by Hazel Davidson,

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**Paper outline:**

The Qld TELLs generic bilingual dictionary project represents an innovative approach to one set of problems faced by newcomers from minority language groups and their teachers but can also be adapted for use by Aboriginal communities and Adult Literacy students from English-speaking backgrounds.

**1. Background and rationale to the project**

Teachers, students and newly arrived immigrant groups have experienced frustration for many years because of the almost complete lack of resources in minority languages. A casual conversation between Hazel Davidson and Hla Win Htun at the TELLs annual conference in July 2008 resulted in the inspiration for a generic picture dictionary, which could be translated into whatever minority language/s needed at any particular time in response to current immigration policy. (TELLs is TAFE English Language and Literacy Services, which provides initial student interviews, tender applications, resources and PD for ESL and Adult Literacy teachers throughout TAFE Queensland.)

Hazel took this idea to TELLs management and the project was born. Illustrator/ESL teacher, Dorothy Court, has worked together with Hazel for a decade producing low level reading and spelling materials for adult learners (see [www.sugarbagondamper.com](http://www.sugarbagondamper.com)). In February 2009 they started on the dictionary and undertook to complete a section in time for the TELLs conference in July. For this purpose they decided to work on verbs, on the grounds that there was very little material already available, largely because verbs are amongst the most difficult group of words in English.

A few weeks later Dorothy and Hazel took the first few pages into the TELLs office to discuss the project in more detail. It was at this point that the TELLs Community Liaison Officers saw the work and became very excited and were extremely keen to start translating immediately. This took Hazel and Dorothy by surprise since they had anticipated completing the generic version before the translation was undertaken but, on the other hand, they were delighted by the enthusiastic response. Inexperience and lack of lead-in time led to a number of unexpected difficulties with fonts, ambiguities and inconsistencies in translation. These presented stimulating and interesting challenges and the whole team learned rapidly. There are four languages under way at the moment. Gatkuoth Kueth and Pastor Moses Leth are the principal translators into Nuer, which is the second largest language group in Southern Sudan and closely related to Dinka, the largest group. Gota Bahanibanje and Pastor Abel Siboniyo are working on Kirundi, the language of Burundi. The Karen are one of the minority groups from Burma and the dictionary is being translated into that language by Hla Win Htun, his daughter, Day Nya Paw Win, and son, Htee Ku Sot Win. Aneta Bilal is leading the translators into Madi, a language from the border area between

Southern Sudan and Uganda. A strong sense of purpose and community endeavour has developed around the work, along with growing confidence and newly discovered abilities within these immigrant communities. There is also increased pride in first language because of the obvious value placed on it by an Australian government agency and by the native English speakers working with the translators. A very exciting collaboration has developed within the project and everyone involved has learned a great deal about both culture and language, not to mention computer layout and fonts.



<b>Karen</b> They are counting cattle. အဝဲသ့ၣ်ကံၤနွဲးဝဲကျိၣ်လီၤ	<b>Kirundi</b> They are counting cattle. Bariko baraharura inka.	<b>Nuer</b> They are counting cattle. Ken kuɛn ken ʏok.
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**2. Linguistic and cultural issues in the design of the resource:**

Expertise from within refugee communities has been combined with that of experienced Anglo-Australian ESL teachers to overcome the various challenges.

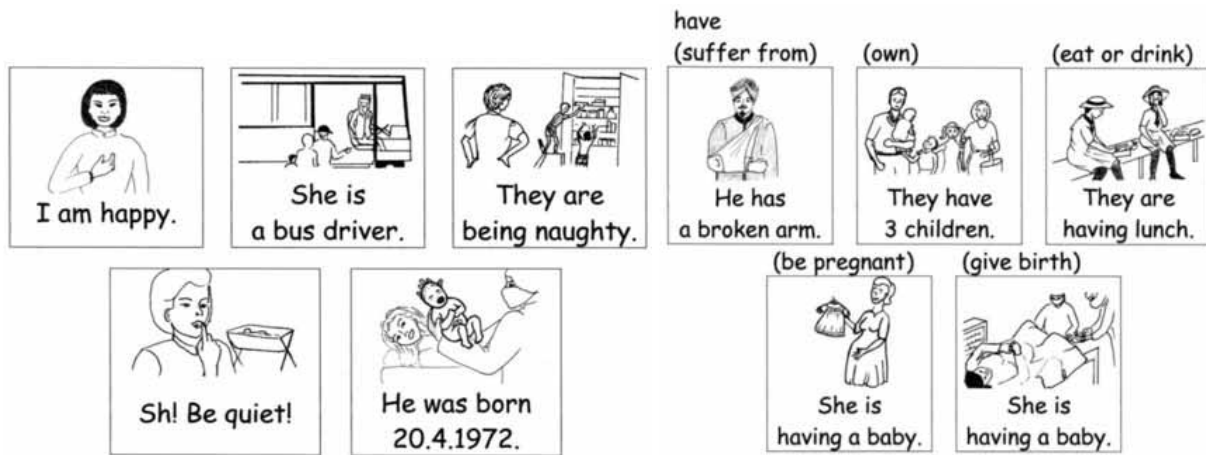
**a) Linguistic:**

To illustrate verbs we needed context, which necessitated selecting tenses. The present continuous was chosen for the great majority of the examples as the tense indicating *now*, *not finished*, rather than the simple present, which is really timeless, the habitual tense of *anytime*. Moreover, the simple present has the additional complication of use as an historic past, especially in children's books and modern teenage colloquial speech, which presents students with a confusing contradiction of assessment requirements for recounts in the simple past. On the other hand, English has some verbs, sometimes called *verbs of state*, which are rarely used in the present continuous. So there are a few examples in the simple present; e.g., The apple costs 20c. There are also a very few in other tenses; e.g., She has lost her book.

Many verbs have abstract meanings and are therefore difficult to illustrate; e.g., *wish for*, *believe*

<p>He often wishes for a car.</p> <p>He often wishes he had a car.</p>	<p>He doesn't believe it!</p>
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Then, of course, there are the verbs which have multiple meanings and/or uses, such as *be* and *have*.



The dreaded phrasal verbs also pose problems; e.g., *look after*, *look at*, *look for*.



**b) Cultural:**

Not only are there difficulties when one culture has different vocabulary because societies operate in different ways, but pictures can not infrequently portray different meanings to different groups of people. One example which arose was with the word *dance*, which Dorothy initially illustrated with an image of a ballet dancer in a tutu. For many of the African translators this was incomprehensible; they had no idea what the woman was doing. So, after quite a bit of head-scratching, we came up with this, which is more culture-neutral:



**c) Need to indicate diversity in age, gender, ethnicity, race, religion:**

To ensure that no group felt excluded and also to demonstrate that gender roles are not fixed in modern Australian society Dorothy consciously and deliberately drew a wide range of people.

**3. Using the resultant resource:**

We envisage that the dictionary will be of use to a wide variety of teachers and learners: monolingual students with problems reading & writing; NESB beginner students, especially those with little or no prior formal schooling; Aboriginal students with print literacy problems and/or with a desire to acquire Standard Australian English; community groups for a range of purposes.

**In the classroom:**

We do NOT envisage that teachers or students will start at beginning and teach or learn all the verbs, or other parts of speech, in order.

The book will obviously be used firstly as a dictionary in the traditional sense, but also for exercises in alphabetical order, vocabulary exercises to fit class programmes, captions for flash cards (with or without pictures) and the illustrations as testing cues.

**For individual study and reference:**

The book will be able to be used as above. The illustrations will also serve as a visual aid to memory.

**4. Which languages in the future?**

The scope is almost unlimited. However, there are a number of conditions which need to be met:

- TELS approval since they own the copyright;
- competent bilingual, print-literate people, preferably both male and female, to translate;
- a co-ordinator with highly developed linguistic skills, as well as good *Word* skills to oversee, ensure consistency of translation, proofread and adjust formatting to fit the varying lengths of translated text;
- funds to pay workers, as well as to cover design and printing costs.

The concept behind the dictionary targets minority languages where similar resources not already available (e.g., in the Oxford bilingual picture dictionaries), and where there are significant numbers of speakers with high need of beginners' English.

5. **Individuals who would like notification** as the dictionary becomes available for sale can email Hazel: [davidson.hazel@gmail.com](mailto:davidson.hazel@gmail.com) . At the moment it is anticipated that the English only and the initial four bilingual versions will be on sale by about the middle of 2010. TAFE Queensland ESL and Adult Literacy teachers will have free access to the books, both in hard copy and on line.