

Helping Learners with Common English Difficulties

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Amharic

Introduction & Background

This guide is designed to support ESOL tutors, volunteers, and staff working with **Amharic**-speaking learners. It outlines the most common challenges these learners face when learning English and offers practical examples, explanations, and exercises to support more effective communication. The aim is to build understanding, patience, and confidence in supporting **Amharic** speakers on their learning journey.

Amharic

Amharic is primarily spoken in Ethiopia, where it serves as the official working language of the federal government.

It is also widely used in:

- **Ethiopia** – Especially in the central and northern regions, including Addis Ababa (capital city), Amhara Region, Parts of Oromia and Southern Nations regions
- **Eritrea** – Spoken by some communities, though Tigrinya is more dominant.

Amharic speakers often face specific challenges when learning English due to differences in phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and cultural communication styles.

Pronunciation & Phonology

- **Consonants not in Amharic:** Sounds like /p/, /v/, /θ/ (“think”), and /ð/ (“this”) don’t exist in Amharic, so learners may substitute them with nearby sounds.
 - Example: “*think*” → “*tink*” or “*this*” → “*dis*.”
- **Consonant clusters:** Amharic syllables usually have a vowel between consonants, so English words like “school” or “spring” may be pronounced with extra vowels (“es-kool”, “is-prin”).
- **Final consonants:** English allows words to end with consonants, but Amharic doesn’t in the same way. Learners may drop or add vowels after them (“book” → “booki”).
- **Stress & intonation:** English stress patterns are unpredictable; Amharic has more regular word stress, so English stress can be difficult to master.

Grammar & Syntax

- **Articles (a, an, the):** Amharic doesn't use articles, so learners often omit or misuse them.
- **Plural & singular forms:** Plural is marked differently in Amharic, so irregular plurals in English (*child* → *children*, *foot* → *feet*) can be confusing.
- **Tenses:** English verb tense/aspect distinctions (perfect, continuous) don't match neatly with Amharic. Learners may avoid complex tenses or overuse the simple present/past.
- **Word order:** Amharic uses **SOV (Subject–Object–Verb)** word order, while English is **SVO**, so **sentence structure can be challenging at first.**
 - Example: Amharic: “*I coffee drink*” → English: “*I drink coffee.*”



Vocabulary & Expression

- **False cognates:** Some borrowed words look or sound familiar but have different meanings.
- **Prepositions:** Amharic uses suffixes/postpositions instead of separate prepositions, so English ones (in, on, at, by, for) are tricky.
- **Idioms:** English idiomatic expressions don't translate directly, making comprehension harder.

Writing System

- Amharic uses the **Ge'ez (Fidel) script**, while English uses the Latin alphabet. Switching alphabets can slow down reading/writing fluency.
- English spelling is irregular compared to Amharic's more phonetic system, so spelling is often a hurdle.

Sociolinguistic & Educational Factors

- Many Ethiopians are multilingual (Amharic + a regional language + English taught at school), but quality of English instruction varies.
- Exposure to English outside classrooms (through media, travel, or business) strongly influences fluency.

Summary:

Amharic speakers usually find **pronunciation, articles, verb tenses, prepositions, and stress** the hardest parts of English, largely because these features either don't exist in Amharic or work very differently.

Common mistakes Amharic speakers make in English

Pronunciation Mistakes

1. /p/ and /f/ confusion

- Amharic doesn't have /p/, so it's often replaced with /f/.
- Example: “paper” → “faper.”

2. /v/ and /b/ substitution

- “very good” → “bery good.”

3. /θ/ (“think”) and /ð/ (“this”) replaced with /t/ or /d/

- “think” → “tink”, “this” → “dis.”

4. Extra vowels in consonant clusters

- “school” → “iskool”, “street” → “istreet.



Grammar Mistakes

1. Articles omitted or overused

- Amharic has no equivalent to “a, an, the.”
- Incorrect: “I bought book.”
- Correct: “I bought a book.”

2. Plural confusion

- Incorrect: “Many childrens are playing.”
- Correct: “Many children are playing.”

3. Tense simplification

- Overuse of simple present/past.
- Incorrect: “I am go to school yesterday.”
- Correct: “I went to school yesterday.”

4. SOV influence (word order)

- Incorrect: “She the food ate.”
- Correct: “She ate the food.”

5. Prepositions misused

- Incorrect: “I am waiting you since morning.”
- Correct: “I have been waiting for you since morning.”

Writing Mistakes

1. Spelling influenced by phonetics

- “*beter*” for “*better*.”
- “*gess*” for “*guess*.”

2. Direct translation from Amharic (literal word-for-word)

- Amharic: እግዚአብሔር ከእኛ ጋር ነው (“God is with us”).
- Learner might write: “*God with us he is.*”

3. Overly formal expressions

- Because school English in Ethiopia often emphasizes textbook/formal English.
- Example: “*I beg to inform you that...*” in casual settings.

Examples in Conversation

- **Amharic speaker:** “*Teacher, I have one question please.*” (missing article → should be “*a question*”)
- **Amharic speaker:** “*Yesterday I am go market.*”(wrong tense → should be “*Yesterday I went to the market.*”)
- **Amharic speaker:** “*Dis book very interesting.*” (/ð/ replaced by /d/ + missing verb → should be “*This book is very interesting.*”)

Overall:

The biggest recurring issues are **pronunciation (p/f, v/b, th sounds), articles, verb tenses, and word order.**

Speaking & Listening Strategies

1. Dialogues & role play

- Practice real-life situations (ordering food, asking for directions).
- Focus on fluency first, then accuracy.

2. Stress & intonation

- Clap or tap rhythm to practice stressed vs. unstressed syllables.
- Compare: “I didn’t say he stole the money” (different stress = different meaning).

3. Media immersion

- Watch English movies, news, YouTube with subtitles.
- Shadowing technique: repeat immediately after hearing native speech.

Cultural & Confidence-Building Strategies

1. Encourage code-switching at first

- Allow learners to mix Amharic and English to reduce anxiety, then gradually push for full English.

2. Celebrate multilingualism

- Highlight that most Ethiopians already juggle multiple languages (Amharic + local + English). This is an advantage, not a weakness.

Summary:

For Amharic speakers, the best approach is **explicit pronunciation practice, clear grammar comparisons (SOV vs. SVO, articles, tenses)**, and lots of **real-life, communicative practice** with English in context.

Common Amharic Phrases



Greetings & Basics

- **Selam** (ሰላም) → Hello / Peace
- **Dehna neh?** (ደኅናነህ?) → How are you? (to a man)
- **Dehna nesh?** (ደኅናነሽ?) → How are you? (to a woman)
- **Dehna nachihu?** (ደኅናናችሁ?) → How are you? (to a group / formal)
- **Dehna yihun** (ደኅናይሁን) → Goodbye (lit. "be well")
- **Amesegenallo** (አመሰግናለሁ) → Thank you
- **Betam amesegenallo** (በጣም አመሰግናለሁ) → Thank you very much



Introductions

- **Simih man new?** (ስምህህማን ነው?) → What is your name? (to a man)
- **Simeh man new?** (ስምሽህማን ነው?) → What is your name? (to a woman)
- **Simeye ... new** (ስሜ ... ነው) → My name is ...
- **Indemin walachu?** (እንዴትነው ያለችሁ?) → How do you do?



At the Table

- **Megeb** (ምግብ) → Food
- **Wuha** (ውሃ) → Water
- **Buna** (ቡና) → Coffee (very important in Ethiopia ☕)
- **Yene konjo buna** (የኔኮንጆ ቡና) → My beautiful coffee

Getting Around

- **Taxi yet new?** (ታክሲየት ነው?) → Where is the taxi?
- **Betam ruk yemihedal?** (በጣም ሩቅ ይሄዳል?) → Is it very far?
- **Qoyyu new** (ቆዩነው) → It's near

Polite Closings

- **Egziabher yimesgen** (እግዚአብሔርይመስገን) → Thanks be to God
- **Egziabher yistilign** (እግዚአብሔርይስጥልኝ) → God bless you
- **Melkam ken** (መልካምቀን) → Good day
- **Dehna deru** (ደኅናደሩ) → Sleep well