

Great success in learning Hebrew in Ethiopia

"The program brings out the best performance in the students," says Professor Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, who has taught Hebrew at the Mekane Yesus seminary and in this connection has introduced the language learning program Bible Online Learner.

By Katrine Schøler Holmgaard, missionary in Ethiopia, April 2019

(translated from the Danish <https://promissio.dk/foelg-med/nyheder/hebraeisk-paa-seminariet/> by Nicolai Winther-Nielsen)



The IT room at the Mekane Yesus Seminary is full of students, but quiet. A silence that reflects full concentration. Because here the students are learning Hebrew through the language learning program Bible Online Learner, which Professor Nicolai Winther-Nielsen has designed and coordinates the development of, and now uses in teaching the students.

A few students go around helping others, and one of them is Aynalem Addis, who is in the Bible translation program at Mekane Yesus Seminary. She familiarizes me thoroughly with the computer program and very pedagogically shows the overviews of vowels and consonants that Nicolai Winther-Nielsen has reviewed with the students.

"Three weeks ago I did not know Hebrew. Now I write different words in the language. The program tells me if it is correct," she says proudly, and after she has enthusiastically shown and explained various functions to me, she tells me with bright eyes: "I study this degree because I want to be a Bible translator. That is why it is very important that I become good at the biblical languages."

She will help translate the Bible into her language, Gamogna, and later she can be a supervisor for translating the Bible into other languages in Ethiopia.

Impressive results

Nicolai Winther-Nielsen is a professor at the Danish Bible Institute in Copenhagen, but in February and March 2019 he was short-term seconded by Promissio as a teacher at the Mekane Yesus Seminary, and in that connection the students learned to use the IT program Bible Online Learner.

"I implemented the system at the seminary, among other things, because the way of learning the language brings out the best performance in the students, and language skills stick better. The learning method means that the students do not sit passively listening and at a theoretical level for a long time. Instead, they themselves are actively engaged all the time, and you don't run the risk of discovering at the exam that a student has not learned the language. At the same time, the program also has an element of games about it, which can make it motivating for the students to learn," explains Nicolai Winther-Nielsen.

Half of the students did not have e-mail addresses when the class began, which says something about how used they are to using computers and the internet. Nevertheless, the pilot project with the implementation of the system and teaching for 30 students has gone beyond all expectations, and Nicolai Winther-Nielsen is very impressed by the performance of the class, which is higher than what he has seen in Western countries that use the system.

The students are also very motivated by the program, which according to Nicolai Winther-Nielsen has several reasons:

"They are the first in Ethiopia to learn Hebrew in this way, it's via a computer, it's a different type of teaching, and they can put all their effort in and get to the top with very clear documentation via the statistics."

"It's like a game"

Tekle Arega sits in the back corner of the room. When I ask him what he thinks about learning Hebrew through a computer program, he replies with a big smile:

"It's like a game - it's fun for us".

The students also use the program when doing homework outside of class time, and while Tekle Arega spells himself "David" and "Esau" in Hebrew, he adds:

"Even if Nicolai is not present in the room, it is still important that I do my job, because Nicolai follows the statistics of how far we are."

It is a motivating factor in a country where teachers have great authority. And the statistics also give free play to the competitive gene when Nicolai Winther-Nielsen publishes anonymized data for the class's performance, where each individual student can compare their own performance with the class.

Great potential for the program

Nicolai Winther-Nielsen sees great potential for Bible Online Learner in Africa, where the goal is for the Bible to be translated by people who use the language as their mother tongue - and where there is a shortage of teachers in the biblical languages.

"The program offers new opportunities for Bible translators and Bible translator training. Here, students with a local language into which the Bible has not yet been translated can learn the biblical languages far out in the countryside by being connected to the system," says Nicolai Winther-Nielsen.

The system also has a program to learn Greek, and that could possibly be the next step in Ethiopia. From midMarch, a new solution was introduced with a small minicomputer, so that the program can run offline without connecting to the Internet.

In the classroom, Zetseat Fekadu and Albene Abraham are assistant teachers, and it is also planned that they will be trained as special users of the system, so that they themselves can teach using Bible Online Learner in the future.