

Said

Contributed by Catharine Driver

Said, who is now 14, was born in Somalia but left there when he was a young child. He then lived for some years in Saudi Arabia with his mother and younger brother. The family came to England when Said was 13 to join his older brother and sister in law. They are currently living in temporary accommodation.

Said's first language was Somali, but he is also very fluent in Arabic. He attended several different schools in Saudi Arabia where he learnt some basic Arabic literacy, and a little Maths as well as Religious Studies. He says that one of the schools was really bad and was closed down. The teachers used to beat him if he did not do his work well! His mother and his older brother speak some English.

Said values his ability to speak Arabic and some basic literacy highly and most of his friends in school are also Arabic speaking Somalis. In one lesson recently he was arguing with them about which type of Arabic was the best, Saudi, Dubai or Yemeni! He attends Arabic school on Saturdays. He also speaks Somali in school and at home but he does not have any literacy in Somali.

The school is a mixed comprehensive in inner London. 23% of the school roll are refugees or asylum seekers. 85% of students speak English as an additional language. The school has high mobility and pupils join and leave the school throughout the school year. The school has good procedures for the admission and induction of students with EAL. During the year of Said's arrival, the school also had an additional Somali and Arabic speaking Induction mentor, who was able to help with the settling in process for Said and many other students.

Said joined the school in February of year 9 just before the mock KS3 SATs exams. He seemed to know no English and have limited literacy in Arabic. He was placed in a tutor group with a couple of other Somali boys who had been in the school since year seven; they were very supportive and made sure he knew his way around the school and helped him settle in. Said made friends quickly through playing football. In class, Said was almost completely silent for the first 4 or 5 months. He listened carefully and observed very intently and he picked up how to do things very quickly when shown how. For example in Maths lessons, he learnt how to draw pie charts and showed signs of understanding basic algebra. At first, Said could hardly form his letters in English, but he attended EAL classes with a small group of other Key Stage 3 new arrivals for 3x 50 minutes a week where he worked on his basic English for negotiating the school day and basic literacy skills. He also had 3 lessons a week of specialist EAL support in Maths. There was occasional LSA support in other lessons.

Said has now been in school for just over a year. He returned from the summer holidays in September of year 10 speaking very fluently and astounding everyone. He said he'd been learning by watching TV during the holidays. His spoken language is distinguished by its speed and clarity of pronunciation. He can hear and pronounce most of the sounds of English accurately. However, he still does not use the past tense much. When asked 'What happened?' He replied 'I sit on the table and start talking'. There are other non standard features such as the repetition of noun and pronoun. At the moment he says,

"Ahmed he kick me." rather than "Ahmed kicked me."

In April, Said was confident enough speaking English to be interviewed by an outside visitor to the school in front of a video camera. He still found it hard to look at the interviewer whom he did not know well, but had no difficulty finding the right words to explain what had helped him when he was new to England

In a year, Said has also made very good progress with reading and can decode a simple story accurately. He needs prompts when he reaches unfamiliar multi-syllable words. He does not yet know all the more complex graphemes, such as 'ough' and 'str'. Said is reluctant to write much without support as his knowledge of the English sound-symbol correspondence is not secure. He gets frustrated because he cannot spell the words he knows and wants to use in his writing. He wants to be told the letter names in order to spell a word, rather than the letter sounds. Said relies on a very good sight vocabulary and is beginning to pick up some spelling conventions. He does not like learning spelling and is often inattentive if it is specifically taught. His mind is still heavily focussed on meaning not accuracy.

This writing was produced unaided in an English lesson where pupils had been working on the genre of suspense writing.

'My hands was shaking and I saw a light cameing from behind me. A was a car? Or was a man? Then I look behind me was a man he have gun then a run away. Then I saw him he kiled a lade.

Now that Said has good oral fluency he needs to concentrate on accuracy in speech and on making the bridge from speaking to writing.

The following areas need to be explicitly taught as far a possible within a curriculum context:

- extending his repertoire of verb choices. He needs to establish the past tense more securely, particularly in the context of the curriculum, and reporting what happened;
- using the indefinite article;
- learn how pronouns are used in place of a noun not in addition to one;
- Secure the 44 phonemes to enable him to spell unfamiliar words phonetically;
- learn more spelling conventions in order to develop accuracy in his writing;
- extend his sentences with a wider range of connectives.

Said is a very fast learner and has a real talent for language. It is important that the rest of his language learning takes place in mainstream classes or is based on relevant subject work with a cognitive challenge. For example, he responded well to a small group lesson on the language of interpreting a line graphs.

Finally, as Said is interested in the world and politics and current affairs and should be encouraged to read newspapers to supplement his TV watching. This will extend his vocabulary. He continues to receive specialist EAL support in Maths lessons to help him catch up with work missed in KS3. In these lessons he is able to learn subject specific vocabulary and concepts together. He also attends EAL classes three times a week instead of MFL in KS4. These lessons are directly related to the core curriculum and give him a chance to rewrite and redraft coursework, to learn more grammar in context and to become familiar with different types of writing for Science and Maths.

Said says he learnt a lot from listening and watching TV. He now thinks he learns a lot from talking to his friends. He is an outgoing and popular boy. When he does not understand he often asks a friend who speaks Arabic to help him. He wants to be better at reading Arabic himself so that he can use a dictionary. Said is clearly proud of his rapid progress in English and has used his own experiences to support other 2 other new Arabic speaking Somali students who have joined the school more recently. He really wants to complete all his GCSE coursework and asks lots of different people to help him. His sister helps at home. In lessons he will ask any adult in the class, be it subject teacher, LSA or EAL teacher.

Recently Said's mother has been in touch with the school because he has told her that he cannot always understand the work in English and Maths and is worried that he is not doing very well. A meeting has been arranged where she can talk to the Somali home school link worker and the EAL teacher who support Said to give her some reassurance that he is making good progress and some ideas and tips for supporting he work at home.