

Ubah

Contributed by Jennifer Cornish and Halima Abdi

Ubah joined this mixed Catholic Comprehensive school in October 2003 and enrolled in Year Ten. She came to England a few months previously from Somalia with her mother and eleven siblings. Her father has been in England for about a year. The family have refugee status and after living for some months in a hostel, have now been re-housed in a self-contained house some distance from the school. Ubah has four siblings at secondary school with her, in Year Eleven, Nine, Eight and Seven. Six younger siblings, (including twins), are at a nearby primary school. There is a baby at home.

When Ubah started at UK secondary school, it was her first experience of schooling. On account of the war and upheaval in Somalia the children were denied the opportunity to attend school regularly. Ubah's older sister and some younger siblings attended Koranic school, where they learnt to recognise Arabic letters and to read some words. For family reasons Ubah did not attend this school. She speaks Somali and can neither read nor write it.

Ubah speaks Somali at home, with friends outside the family and also at school with her siblings. There are few other speakers of Somali among the school's students. At break and lunchtime Ubah spends time with her siblings or in the library. She says she feels like an outsider and wants to be part of the school community.

The school has an EAL department of four teachers (full-time equivalent 3.4). In addition the school has a Somali speaking bilingual assistant for approximately 20 hours per week. The school has 600 students: 63% of students speak English as an additional language and nearly 20% of students are refugees or asylum seekers.

Ubah has attended the school's induction programme for stage 1 new entrants, (4 hours per week) in the autumn term. She has 6 lessons per week of the Extra English Option for Key Stage 4 students. She has had in-class support or 1:1 literacy from a bilingual language assistant (BLA) for approximately 2 hours each week.

In January Ubah and her sister in Year 11 started an intensive literacy programme for students New to Schooling (funded by Connexions and organised by the authority's EMA team). This is a pilot project in response to demand across the authority for provision for students who present at secondary phase with no prior, or limited, schooling. Such students are defined as:

- having few or no literacy skills in any language
- lack of basic curriculum knowledge
- lack of formal learning skills
- difficulties in adjusting to institutional expectations
- emotional and behavioural problems resulting from frustration and/or poor self-esteem.

The project involves two hours of intensive teaching, four mornings per week for six weeks. The two students are taught by the Somali BLA, who was trained specifically for this pilot project. The course is structured around a real book with complementary activities to develop literacy in English. Midway through the pilot, Ubah has 100% attendance and is clearly enjoying the lessons. (At a recent meeting with her father, he said he could see that she was making good progress.)

Ubah herself feels that she is making progress with her reading and writing. She can now recognise a number of short high frequency words and she has gained the confidence to tackle longer words. She can find her way down a page of text and recognise familiar words. Ubah can write short words without copying and can spell single syllable words from memory.

Ubah is starting to speak English a little. In class she will volunteer a short answer and she has made friends in her EAL option group. She particularly enjoyed a recent group visit to the local Islamic Centre and was able to read captions on the photos taken. She likes copying English and her letters are well formed and words clearly demarcated. Ubah likes to borrow books from the school library and wants to make progress with her reading.

At school she particularly enjoys PE, cooking and using the computer. (She says she finds Science very difficult because she does not benefit from in-class support in those lessons.) Ubah will log on at every opportunity and uses the computer after school when she can, as do all her siblings in the school. (They do not have use of a computer at home.) They frequently log on to Somali web sites and their progress in English is helping them to read Somali.

Ubah has now become accustomed to the routines of school and is benefiting from opportunities to learn English through practical activities: she engages particularly in Food Technology, using the computer and going on educational visits. In terms of her spoken language, she uses one word or short utterances and now needs to develop question forms. Ubah can read many short common words and the gist of sentences especially if supported by pictures. She is starting to recognise spelling patterns and reproduce them.

For her Year Ten work experience placement, Ubah has expressed a desire to spend two weeks with the police. (The school has a full-time officer on site.) Ubah is a reserved child. While her sister, just one year older, is chatty and forthcoming about what goes on at home, Ubah is reticent. At home, her father tells us, she helps with cooking while big sister is listening to music! Ubah does most of the shopping for home and uses English a little for that. She is serious about her studies and takes care over her presentation, one of the reasons why she likes to use a computer. She would like to be a doctor or teacher.

At first Ubah was extremely dependent on the BLA and would leave class to look for her. She is now starting to be more independent and goes to lessons promptly. She has a good attendance record and has missed only a few days of school. She has made friends with other students from her Extra English option and is starting to feel more settled now after three months at school.

Ubah and her four siblings travel to school together by bus and some weeks ago they were re-housed which resulted in a new route to negotiate to and from school. (Mum and dad have to escort the younger brothers and sisters to primary school.) The five children have experienced some difficulty in arriving on time every day.

A recent occurrence illustrates Ubah's resourcefulness and her ability to cope with new situations. One day recently Ubah's school bag was accidentally left on the bus. It contained most of her school books and she was concerned about the loss. However, she showed great presence of mind, returned to the bus stop and spoke to a bus driver on the same route, (who happened to speak Somali), in her attempt to recover her property. Although clearly upset, she reacted calmly and without fuss. This incident demonstrates her characteristic determination to overcome obstacles and to succeed.