

Children Learn More when Taught in their Mother Tongue

- *Written by Jens Madsen, botanist, member of the board of GtU*
- *Translated from Danish by Julie Arlgade.*

In Denmark, politicians and citizens quarrel, when the subject hits mother-tongue-based teaching in languages other than Danish. This arises the question whether or not bilingual school children subsequently have the ability to integrate into the Danish society? Such considerations we never had at GTU, when the Cooperative in Amataltal asked, if we would cooperate in the establishment of a bilingual school in Amataltal. Indeed, we always have a critical dialogue with our partners. However, we also wish to keep an open mind and let the suggestions of people in the developing countries become the fundament of the projects. Furthermore, since there was a broad support for a bilingual elementary school within both the different ethnic groups of the local area and the authorities, the decision was straightforward: The establishment of a school where children are taught in both the Tuareg language and the official language, French.

An endless need for education

The people of Amataltal is predominantly Tuareg, in which many people still live as nomads and have little tradition for education. On a national level, only one in four knows how to read and write, and in Amataltal this applies to only a very small percentage of the population. With this in mind, DANIDA opened the bilingual school in 2002, which serves as a boarding school and has about 100 students. All of the ethnic groups of the area are represented in the school, and it works very well overall. The proportion of girls in the school is even higher than the average of the schools in Niger. This is due to a special effort made by the Cooperative of Amataltal to enhance girls and women's opportunity to educate themselves.

GTU does not deploy permanent employees. On the other hand, several of the association's members operate as advisors and are in a constant dialogue with our partners. An example of this is the Associate Professor and linguist Karl-G. Prasse. Karl has developed the Tuareg textbooks for all grades of the primary school in Niger.

The challenges of the school are easily detected

DANIDA's financial contribution to the school ceased in 2010, in which the Cooperative of Amataltal took over the responsibility for the catering of the pupils. It has proven to be a difficult task, as the Nigerian government contributes only sparingly, and the new school horticulture project has a hard time producing enough vegetables. Fortunately, the teachers of the school are very motivated, and according to the official educational supervision, the school provides a high level of education. The school therefore easily attracts new students, who usually carry out the six-year elementary school. However, it is difficult to retain the most skilled students in the school system, given the lack of middle schools nearby. Many of the students, who are undergoing training in neighboring municipalities, stops prematurely, as the children often live in squalid conditions and misses their families.

In other words, the School of Amataltal is both a success and a challenge, which emphasizes that development is a complicated process!

85 years the 14th August 2014:

Karl-Gottfried Prasse – linguist researcher, professor emeritus, Værløse

Karl-G. Prasse is the principal Danish connoisseur of the Berber languages and an internationally recognised expert within his field. He is best known for his work on the Tuareg language, a Berber language spoken by a significant minority in a number of North and West African countries.

In 2008, he was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters as a sign of recognition of his great effort.

Enrolled as a student at the University of Copenhagen, Karl-G. Prasse, 1948-1950, studied general linguistics and Hebrew, and 1950-1953, Arabic and Old-Egyptian. 1953-54 Prasse settled in Paris and Rome studying Berber languages, including Tuareg, and Arabic, Somali, Old-Ethiopic and Amharic. 1958-1959, he initiated his Tuareg research in Paris and Algeria. In Paris he married his wife Bodil.

In 1956, Karl-G. Prasse graduated as Master of Arts in Egyptology at the University of Copenhagen, continued to study the Hamito-Semitic languages and at an early date specialised in Berber and Arabic dialects (especially Cairene Arabic). From 1969 to 1996, he held a chair as professor (lektor) of Berber and Arabic dialects at the University of Copenhagen – the majority of this time at the then Carsten Niebuhr Institute.

Karl-G. Prasse conducted the development of an orthography for the written Tuareg language based on the Latin alphabet, and he has published a complete Tuareg grammar. In 2003, after 30 years of work, he published a Tuareg-French dictionary in two volumes.

In 2002, via the NGO Genvej til Udvikling (Shortcut to Development), member of the Emmaus-movement, Karl-G. Prasse obtained Danida fundings for the establishment of a school in Amataltal in northern Niger, where, beside French, also the Tuareg language is taught - among others according to his school textbooks. The school is indeed named after Karl-G. Prasse.

Notes by the coordinator of the GTU:

The notice was printed in the Danish newspaper "Politiken" on 14th August, the day of Karl-G. Prasse's anniversary.

The notice is translated from French by Gitte Vejlgard.

Værløse is a suburb of Copenhagen, the Danish capital.