

East African Translation Project

Project Overview

This project provides training and support for teachers to translate openly licensed digital stories on the [African Storybook platform](#) to Somali, enabling students and families to preserve their heritage language while developing literacy skills. SABIER is seeking a grant from the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) to expand the work begun by the Saint Paul Public Schools in cooperation with SABIER which was also funded by a (MNHS) grant. The work funded by the initial grant was focused on translating level 1 translations during summer 2025. The expanded grant managed by SABIER will continue the translation work, focusing on level 2+ books.

The African Storybook platform is an open-access digital resource containing over 4,900 stories that center African characters, culture, and history. Users can create their own stories, upload them to the platform, and translate books existing on the platform. The site also features over 8,000 translations of these books in more than 240 African languages according to Saide. The books are available digitally and can be freely downloaded. Currently, 261 different African languages are represented on the platform.. However, only 15 digital books are currently available in Somali, creating a significant gap in accessible reading materials for the Somali community.

Background and Community Need

Heritage Language Preservation

Somali serves as a heritage language that plays a crucial role in identity and cultural preservation for the Somali community. In recent years, Somali language programs have emerged as essential tools for preserving and revitalizing language and cultural practices. This effort aligns with broader decolonization movements, where educational spaces are intentionally created for children to learn and take pride in their native language.

Similar to other heritage languages, there is urgency within the Somali community to prevent language loss. This need has driven the development of Somali language programs both within community organizations and educational institutions. As requests for these programs increase, access to appropriate literacy materials becomes critical for supporting effective language instruction.

Historical Context and Challenges

Somali is historically an oral language, with its writing system adopted in 1972. This relatively recent development means there is limited access to written texts in the language. Many students and families struggle to find books in their native language, significantly limiting language learning opportunities and preservation efforts.

Educational institutions in Minnesota have historically focused on Eurocentric language offerings such as Spanish, French, and German. Many Somali students, who already speak two or more languages, must enroll in these Eurocentric language options to earn the two years of language instruction that most postsecondary institutions recommend. This practice has led to the harmful belief that heritage languages do not "count" because they are not offered for high school or college credit, devaluing the multilingual assets of Somali students and discouraging heritage language learning and preservation.

Minnesota Bilingual Seal Program

The implementation of the Minnesota Bilingual Seal in 2015 provided educational institutions with a way to recognize both learned and heritage languages. Through this program, students complete approved language assessments to demonstrate proficiency and can earn a World Language Certificate, Bilingual Gold Seal, or Bilingual Platinum Seal. These awards qualify for 8-20 college credits at Minnesota state colleges and universities.

The program honors multilingual assets in 30 different languages, and students completing assessments are recognizing the value of learning and preserving their heritage language. However, significant achievement gaps exist between heritage and world language learners. In both 2023 and 2024, students enrolled in established language programs in Saint Paul Public Schools earned the most and highest awards.

Nearly 80% of students who registered for Spanish language proficiency assessments qualified for awards, benefiting from access to various programming options including dual language immersion, world language classes, and heritage language classes. In contrast, less than 30% of students who registered for Somali language proficiency assessments qualified for awards. When interviewed, many Somali students shared that while they are confident in listening and speaking abilities, they have never received formal instruction in reading and writing Somali, causing them to struggle in these assessment areas.

Project Goals

- Support language preservation efforts to help Somali students read and learn in their native language
- Expand the number of higher-level books (level 2+) and online learning resources available to the Somali community
- Improve student performance on Bilingual Seal assessments by providing access to appropriate reading materials
- Close achievement gaps between heritage and world language learners
- Support compliance with the READ Act requirements for providing native language literacy resources to families

Scope of Work

Phase 1: Reflection and Training

Team members will reflect on the initial translation project completed in summer 2025, identifying strengths and challenges with the process. Staff will receive comprehensive training

on the workflow to download, translate, review, and post finished translations to both the African Storybook platform and internal Moodle site.

Phase 2: Text Selection and Assignment

The team will select and prioritize texts on the African Storybook platform for translation, focusing on higher-level books with important cultural stories, traditions, and thematic content that aligns with language curriculum. Team members will be assigned specific texts to translate based on their expertise and interests.

Phase 3: Translation and Quality Assurance

Staff will translate assigned digital books while participating in individual check-ins with team leads to review progress and address questions. All translated texts will undergo peer review by another team member before approval for posting on the African Storybook platform.

Phase 4: Publication and Community Engagement

Team members will receive training on posting texts to the African Storybook platform and will publish their translated works. Additionally, over 400 copies of translated texts will be printed and distributed to families and SPPS classrooms to support literacy development. Promotional materials will be created and presented at school and community events to raise awareness about available resources.

Timeline

- **October 2025 (3 hours):** Partnership consultation, reflection, training, and text selection
- **October-December 2025 (157 hours):** Translation work with monthly individual check-ins
- **January 2026 (3 days):** Quality assurance review, platform training, and posting
- **January-February 2026 (1 day):** Promotional materials creation and community engagement planning

Expected Impact

Short-term Outcomes

- 75% of selected digital books translated to Somali and posted to the African Storybook platform
- Each translator completes at least 6 higher-level books (level 2+)
- Immediate access to expanded Somali reading materials for students and families

Intermediate-term Outcomes

- 100% of selected digital books translated and posted
- 423 printed copies distributed to families and classrooms
- Each translator completes at least 9 higher-level books (level 2+)
- Increased utilization of Somali texts in educational settings

Long-term Outcomes

- At least 60 additional higher-level books available for students and families (900% increase)
- Students, teachers, and families actively accessing the platform to read, translate, and create original content
- Improved performance on Bilingual Seal assessments
- Enhanced literacy development in both Somali and English

Enduring Value and Sustainability

Educational Support

This project provides educational institutions with Somali language programs increased access to texts for developing language and literacy skills. Currently, there are no higher-level books available on the African Storybook platform in Somali. Expanded access to written texts should improve reading scores on Bilingual Seal assessments and support READ Act compliance by providing families with native language literacy resources.

Community Impact

The project addresses the critical need for Somali texts among families interested in developing reading skills. Openly licensed digital books enable all families to foster literacy skills, potentially closing achievement gaps between students with and without access to formal language programs. Research demonstrates that developing literacy skills in the native language positively impacts English reading development.

Cultural Preservation

By increasing available Somali texts through openly licensed digital books, the project promotes language preservation and revitalization through culturally responsive stories. Languages based solely on oral tradition are vulnerable to loss, making written resource creation essential for preserving cultural identity and heritage.

Ongoing Development

SPPS Somali language teachers will design projects for students to write and illustrate original stories in Somali for platform publication. Community members can register as translators to continue the work, and the platform's support for over 260 languages encourages broader African language participation. The project aims to inspire future Somali and African language authors who may begin by publishing on the platform before pursuing other publishing opportunities.