

Bridging the Gap: Introducing Eritrean Tactile Language to Foster Inclusive Education and Accessibility



By : - Eyobiel Tsigehanes

Temesgen Iyasu, Rodas Tekle, and Daniel Teklegergish, counselors at the Warsay Ykealo School in Sawa, have developed a form of communication especially designed for the deaf, blind, and deaf-blind communities. This groundbreaking medium will revolutionize how individuals with sensory impairments connect with one another.

- **Why don't we start with your passion for disability advocacy?**

Disability can affect anyone at any time, reminding us of the unpredictability of life. As social beings, humans rely on one another to fulfill their needs and achieve a sense of completeness. Just as pieces of a puzzle come together to create a unified image, individuals require interactions and support from others to reach their full potential. It is through mutual dependence and connection that individuals can enhance their strengths, address their weaknesses, and ultimately find fulfillment in their relationships and experiences.



Temesgen Iyasu

Thus, the notion of perfection is not attainable in isolation, but rather through the collaboration and support of others. When my blind friends need me to read something for them, they never fail to crack me up with their request: “Hey, can I borrow your eye?” It’s always said in such a witty and lighthearted manner that I can’t help but chuckle. It just goes to show that humor truly knows no bounds.

Rodas Tekle

Before discussing the new medium of communication you have developed, it is important to first establish a clear understanding of blindness, deafness, and deaf-blindness.



Rodas Tekle

Blindness, deafness, and deaf-blindness are distinct conditions that affect a person’s ability to see, hear, or both. These conditions can be diagnosed through

various tests and evaluations conducted by medical professionals, such as ophthalmologists, audiologists, or deaf-blind specialists. Proper diagnosis and understanding of the specific type and extent of the individual's impairment is crucial in determining the appropriate support and accommodations needed to help them navigate and thrive in their daily life. Individuals who are blind may face challenges in two out of the four communication skills – reading and writing. However, they are still able to effectively communicate through speaking and hearing. Additionally, alternative methods such as Braille can also be utilized for reading and writing purposes. And deaf individuals often rely on alternative forms of communication, such as sign language, to interact with the world around them. Sign language allows deaf individuals to communicate through hand gestures and visual cues, as they are unable to hear spoken words. By learning to read and write, deaf individuals can effectively communicate with others using their visual and tactile senses. This unique form of communication highlights the resilience and adaptability of blind and deaf individuals in navigating a world designed primarily for those who can see and hear.

- *And in case of deaf-blindness?*

Individuals with deaf-blindness can be categorized into four groups based on their level of vision and hearing. The first group includes those who can partially see and hear. The second group consists of individuals who can partially see but are profoundly deaf. The third group includes those who can partially hear but are visually impaired. The fourth and rarest case is complete deafness and blindness.

Daniel Teklegergish

- *Can you give us an overview of your project?*

This medium of communication is called Eritrean Tactile Language. And it offers an alternative mode of communication that does not rely on the traditional skills of hearing, listening, reading, and writing. Instead, it is based entirely on tactile skills.

- **How was the project initiated?**

Two years ago, the idea for our project was born when Mr. Amanuel Tekie, a blind teacher at Abrha Bahta School for the Blind, highlighted the communication challenges faced by individuals who are both deaf and blind. He shared with us the difficulties encountered when these individuals gathered at events, particularly those organized by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare. Mr. Amanuel explained how the chairmen of the deaf and blind associations resorted to communicating through a third party, a translator, which often resulted in unnatural and ineffective communication. This revelation sparked our interest, leading us to delve deeper into how we could address this issue and facilitate more efficient and seamless communication for these individuals.



Daniel Teklegergish

Our journey began with research and literature analysis on how individuals who are deaf-blind communicate through pro-tactile techniques in America. Pro-tactile encompasses American Sign Language with tactile methods, enabling successful communication for the deaf-blind community. To adopt this approach to our Eritrean context, we decided to integrate Eritrean Sign Language with the Eritrean script, Geez, to create an Eritrean tactile language.

- **How did the process go and what steps did you take?**

We conducted research and planning for our programs while we were working as counselors at Warsay Ykealo School in Sawa. Upon our annual visit to Asmara for the summer, we promptly implemented the initiatives we had developed. We took the opportunity to bring our idea to life by collaborating with the Abrha Bahta School of the blind and the Akrya School of the deaf. With their support, we selected four students from the Abrha Bahta School of the Blind, including one

who is deaf-blind, two students from the Akrya School of the deaf, and one student who is neither blind nor deaf. This diverse group of students is the sample of our project. Our innovative communication method for the deaf blind combines elements of Braille and sign language. We teach individuals to use their palm as a writing surface, similar to Braille, with a grid of nine imaginary dots representing Geez alphabet characters. In addition, we provide instruction in international deaf-blind gesture alphabets and English block letters, as well as training in tactile language by giving students a vocabulary of 50 words. Finally, we demonstrated that individuals who are deaf and blind can effectively communicate with each other without the need for a translator.

- **What are the main goals of this program?**

Our primary goal is to facilitate communication for the most vulnerable members of society – the deaf-blind – and integrate them into the community. We also aim to establish a means of communication between deaf and blind individuals, creating a new language called Eritrean tactile language. This language can be of great significance for the deaf community, as it can be used for communication even in darkness when traditional sign language is not effective.

Through our project, we hope to break down communication barriers and enhance social interaction for individuals with sensory impairments in our society

- **What are your plans for the future?**

Our newly developed Eritrean Tactile Language is just the beginning of our journey toward inclusive education and an inclusive way of living for all. We are committed to ensuring that every individual, including the deaf-blind, has access to the resources they need to thrive in society. By working with experts and creating a reference booklet, we want to take a step towards training educators in this new medium of communication. Our ultimate goal is to empower the deaf, blind, and deaf-blind community and solve the challenges they face in their everyday life. Together, we can make a difference and create a more inclusive and accessible world for all.

- **We wish you the best of luck in all your future endeavors and thank you all for your ti**

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