"Inside Big, Outside Small" : Language repertoire, voice and agency in an Ethiopian ESOL learner's migration experience

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1. Introduction

This case study explores the multilingual life of Hana (pseudonym), a 25-year-old Ethiopian woman who attends a beginner ESOL class at the Baytree Centre in London and works as a waitress. It focuses on her repertoire, language biography, English learning experiences, and beliefs about "good English".

My central argument is that Hana should not be understood only through her A1/A1+ English level. This label is useful for classroom planning, but it cannot explain the complexity of her communicative life. Hana uses Amharic, emerging English, limited receptive Oromo, gesture, photographs, a vocabulary notebook and Google Translate. Amharic carries family and emotional security, while English carries work, speed and adult independence in London.

For me, the most important phrase in the interview is Hana's description of herself as *"inside big, outside small"* (Appendix 1, line 66). It captures the central tension of the case. Hana has adult knowledge, family responsibility and practical intelligence, but limited English sometimes makes these qualities difficult for others to recognise. Her difficulty is not only linguistic, it is social, because it depends on how institutions, employers, listeners respond to developing English. I argue that Hana's story challenges deficit views of beginner ESOL learners, but also warns against simply celebrating resilience. Hana is resourceful, yet many public and workplace spaces leave little room for slow, accented or developing English.

2. Methods, Ethics and Positionality

The data comes from a semi-structured interview with Hana. It is also informed by my own contextual understanding of ESOL learning at Baytree. A pseudonym is used throughout. The interview lasted about 56 minutes and was conducted in simple English because Hana's spoken English was around A1/A1+. This made the interview more accessible. It also shaped the data. Hana's answers were sometimes short, repeated or supported by gesture, examples and translation tools. Thus, I read the transcript as a situated interaction. It is not a complete record of Hana's inner world. Meaning was co-constructed through limited English, shared context, embodied communication and occasional digital support. This follows Pavlenko's (2007) view that language biographies are not neutral containers of facts. They are narrated in particular conditions, for particular listeners, and through the resources available at the time.

During the interview, Hana used pauses, photographs, Google Translate and occasional Amharic or Ethiopian cultural words. I understand these resources as part of her repertoire. They helped her keep meaning moving when English alone was not enough. My placement experience at Baytree also shaped this interpretation. I saw beginner ESOL learners use shared languages, gestures and peer explanation to stay involved in tasks. This experience helped me see Hana's Amharic use as participation rather than avoidance.

At the same time, I need to remain cautious about my own positionality. Because Baytree felt warm and supportive to me as a volunteer, I may be tempted to describe it too positively. Yet Hana's wider life remains difficult. Her experiences are shaped not only by classroom support, but also by family separation, low-paid labour and institutional pressure. This reminds me that ESOL provision can offer important spaces of belonging and participation, but it cannot remove the structural inequalities that shape migrant women's lives. This case study is also small-scale and situated, so Hana's story should not be read as representative of all Ethiopian migrant women or all ESOL learners.

3. Linguistic Repertoire

In the interview, I realised that her language use cannot simply be described as "Amharic + English". Instead, it is made up of different resources that she has developed across multiple stages of her life. This reflects Blommaert and Backus's (2011) view that linguistic repertoires are built through people's histories, encounters and learning experiences. Amharic is the language in which Hana feels most

fluent and emotionally secure. At the beginning of the interview, she mentioned that she had called her mother that morning and greeted her with *"selam enat"* (hello, mother; Appendix 1, line 12). Later, she described Amharic as *"bet"* (home; Appendix 1, line 16). Here, "bet" does not simply refer to a physical place, but to a state of being understood, relaxed and not having to constantly explain herself. When she showed me a photograph of her family preparing "*buna"* (Ethiopian coffee) in a "*jebena"* (a traditional Ethiopian clay pot), she said that what she heard in her mind was Amharic: women talking quickly, laughing and sharing family time (Appendix 1, lines 58–62). These details suggest that Amharic is not merely a communicative code. It carries memory, intimacy and cultural rhythm.

By contrast, English plays a more outward-facing social role in Hana's life. She describes English as *"London life"* (Appendix 1, line 86), which shows how closely it is tied to work, public services, customer interaction and everyday mobility in the city. English gives her access to certain spaces of social participation, but it is also the language in which she often feels restricted. Hana explained that in Amharic she can respond quickly, make jokes and express herself more naturally, whereas in English the words often *"don't come"* (Appendix 1, line 64). Her phrase *"inside big, outside small"* (Appendix 1, line 66) is therefore especially powerful. It is not only about limited language proficiency, but also about a feeling of being compressed in social interaction. Her thoughts, experiences and emotions are rich inside, but in English-dominant spaces, only a small version of herself can be shown.

This is where Blommaert and Rampton's (2011) discussion of linguistic inequality becomes important. Hana's repertoire is rich, but her resources do not carry equal value across contexts. Amharic allows her to feel whole in family and community life, yet it has limited power in many institutional spaces in London. English offers mobility and access, but at this stage it cannot fully carry her thoughts, humour and emotions. Digital tools, photographs and gestures can help her bridge communication gaps, for example by using Google Translate to check meanings, photographs to explain family and culture, and gestures to keep interaction going. However, these strategies can only support communication, they do not remove the privileged position of English in institutional settings. Therefore, the key question is not simply what linguistic resources Hana has, but where these resources are recognised as competence and where they are treated as insufficient.

4. Language biography

Hana's language biography shows how closely language learning is tied to migration, labour and family responsibility. She came to London as an English learner, but also as the eldest daughter in a transnational family. In the interview, she talked about sending money home and feeling responsible for holding the family together. She explained:

> *"Hold family. Make them safe. Like roof. [points upward] I want be like roof for my family"* (Appendix 1, line 74).

This image is powerful because *"a roof"* suggests more than financial support. It also suggests shelter, protection and responsibility. For Hana, English learning is already connected to the role she feels she must play for people who remain far away.

This responsibility helps explain why English matters so much in her daily life. When Hana describes English as *"London life"* (Appendix 1, line 86), she is referring to the spaces where she has to work, earn money, use services and manage everyday tasks. English also gives her the possibility of relying less on her cousin. She speaks about her cousin with love and gratitude, but she also says that she does not want to depend on others *"all time"* (Appendix 1, line 18). She wants to *"do myself"* (Appendix 1, line 44). This simple phrase carries a strong sense of dignity. English matters because it may allow her to act more independently and be recognised as a capable adult.

Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment allows a more critical reading of this pattern than simply describing Hana as "motivated", because it asks how identity, capital and ideology shape whether language learning appears worth the risk. English can give Hana access to economic capital: it enables her to move from relatively invisible kitchen work into customer-facing waitressing, where the pay and tips are better. Yet the same move also exposes her to customers' judgements and to safety-related demands such as understanding *"allergy"* (Appendix 1, lines 110–130). English can also expand her practical autonomy and help her be recognised as a competent adult, allowing her to read letters or call the GP without repeatedly relying on her cousin (Appendix 1, lines 42–44). She is therefore investing not in English as an abstract competence, but in possible identities as a competent worker, an independent adult and a family provider. These identities are relational: she sends money home and wants to be *"like a roof"* for her family (Appendix 1, lines 30–32 and 72–76).

However, access to these identities remains conditional because employers, customers and institutions can still withhold recognition from a speaker of developing English. This complicates discourses that explain migrant learners' progress through individual effort or a willingness to integrate: what appears to be personal motivation is produced within transnational care obligations, low-paid labour and unequal conditions of recognition.

Her imagined future also complicates a linear model of integration. She imagines working in childcare, but also opening a coffee or food business organised around *buna* (Ethiopian coffee), *injera* (a fermented, sour flatbread and staple food) and *shiro* (a chickpea-based stew) (Appendix 1, lines 206–210). These Amharic terms are not decorative signs of cultural identity. They name forms of knowledge that are only partially translatable into English. Earlier, for example, Hana says that *injera* is *"bread, but not bread"* because the English label cannot fully convey its texture, sour taste or the practice of eating it by hand (Appendix 1, lines 146–150). Retaining the Ethiopian terms therefore allows her to position herself as a knowledgeable cultural subject, rather than only as a deficient English learner. Her imagined business would not simply mark assimilation into British society; it could convert cultural and linguistic resources that are often devalued in English-dominant settings into economic and social value. However, this possibility should not be romanticised. Hana repeatedly frames it as conditional on first acquiring more English and money (Appendix 1, lines 206–210). Integration here is therefore an uneven negotiation across London and Ethiopia, in which English may expand her mobility without replacing the language, food knowledge and family attachments through which she imagines her future.

This connects with Blommaert's (2010) discussion of how migration changes the value of linguistic resources across global spaces. Migration expands Hana's repertoire, but not in an equal way. In London, English has high public value because it is linked to work, services and institutional expectations. Amharic continues to carry identity, intimacy and transnational family care. Her

multilingual life is therefore additive, but also tiring. It gives her more resources, while placing her in a language market where some resources are valued more than others.

5. English learning across school, work and ESOL

Hana's English learning has not been a simple journey from "not knowing" to "knowing". It has been shaped by different social spaces. At school, English was linked to correction and shame. At work, it became tied to speed, risk and income. At Baytree, it temporarily became something she could try out with support. I therefore do not only ask where she learnt English. I also ask how each space shaped whether she dared to speak, how she spoke and how she was heard.

In Ethiopia, English was a secondary school subject. Hana remembers copying from the blackboard, learning grammar such as "I am, you are, he is" (Appendix 1, line 94), and practising reading and writing. However, what affected her most was not the grammar itself, but the feeling of speaking in front of the whole class. She says:

> *"Scary. If I make mistake, students laugh. Teacher say, 'No, wrong.' Then I feel bad. So I quiet"* (Appendix 1, line 96).

This silence should not be read as a lack of ability. I interpret it as self-protection in a classroom where mistakes brought embarrassment. Cook's (1999) critique of the "native-speaker model" speaks to this point: when learners are judged against an idealised standard of correctness, speaking can feel risky rather than empowering. What Hana learnt at school was therefore not only English grammar. She also learnt fear.

After moving to London, English changed meaning. It was no longer only a school subject. It became something she had to use immediately in daily life. In adult migrant language education in England, English is often linked to settlement, integration and responsibility (Simpson & Hunter, 2023). Hana's experience reflects this pressure, but in very ordinary moments. When she first arrived in London, she could not understand a shop assistant and could only keep saying "yes" (Appendix 1, lines 100–102). She laughs when she remembers this, but she also says she felt "like a child" (Appendix 1, line 102) at the time. I read this as a moment of adult infantilisation, not just a listening problem. Hymes' (1996) concept of voice is helpful here. The issue is not only whether Hana spoke, but whether she was heard as a capable adult.

Work further changed her relationship with English. Washing dishes in the kitchen gave her some safety because she could manage with only a few words. Becoming a waitress moved her into a much more visible role. She had to respond quickly in front of customers, managers and colleagues. This was not simply more language practice. It was a move into front-of-house visibility. She learnt service phrases such as "What would you like?", "One moment please" and "Card or cash?" (Appendix 1, line 126). She also wrote down words like "receipt, allergy and gluten" (Appendix 1, line 128) in her vocabulary notebook. These words may look basic, but they are not trivial. They relate to service quality, customer safety and her ability to do her job well. From Blommaert and Backus's (2011)

repertoire perspective, these words are specialised resources that Hana builds in a specific work context. They are not just isolated vocabulary items.

For example, "allergy" (Appendix 1, line 130) is not an ordinary word for Hana. It is a high-stakes term that cannot be guessed. If she cannot understand whether a customer is allergic to nuts, milk or gluten, she knows she must ask her manager. Her workplace English is therefore contextualised and consequence-oriented. A word matters not because it is "advanced", but because misunderstanding it may have real consequences.

This is where Baytree becomes important. At school, laughter silenced Hana. At work, speed and risk create anxiety. At Baytree, the slower pace, visual support and a "good laugh" (Appendix 1, line 170) allow her to try again. The classroom is not simply easier than the workplace. Rather, the interactional order is different. Rampton et al.'s (2018) idea of sociolinguistic citizenship reminds us that participation depends not only on individual ability, but also on how the space is organised. At Baytree, Hana can say "I don't understand" (Appendix 1, line 168). She can use pictures and the whiteboard. She can also build language slowly with her peers. In this sense, Baytree temporarily lowers the cost of making mistakes.

The example of "symptoms" shows this clearly:

> *"In doctor lesson, teacher say 'symptoms'. I don't know this word. Very difficult. The Ethiopian woman next to me, she also don't know. We look at picture ... and she say in Amharic: sewinetish sitamem, min yisemashal? (when body not good, what you feel) Then I understand"* (Appendix 1, line 182).

Here, Amharic did not replace English learning. It helped Hana cross a barrier and return to the English task. This is one value of translanguaging. It does not necessarily keep learners in their home language. It can build a bridge into English practice (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cooke et al., 2019).
However, I do not want to idealise Baytree. It can help Hana be seen as a resourceful learner rather than a "not smart" speaker (Appendix 1, line 216). Yet this recognition does not automatically extend to restaurants, public services or the housing market. Translanguaging also cannot remove rent pressure or impatient customers. Baytree's value lies in showing that another kind of interaction is possible. When the classroom allows slower pace, multiple resources and mistakes, learners' hidden capacities become easier to see.

6. **Language Ideology, Investment and Voice**

Hana's investment in English is closely linked to her beliefs about how English should sound and what it should allow her to do. According to Weber and Horner (2012), language ideology includes people's ideas, feelings, norms and values about language. When Hana first connects "good English" with British English, speed, a pleasant accent and no mistakes (Appendix 1, line 194), she is not simply expressing a personal preference. She is responding to a wider hierarchy of English. Her view reflects native-speakerist ideology (Holliday, 2006), where legitimacy appears to belong to those who sound close to an idealised British standard.

Later, Hana gives a different answer. Good English means that others can understand her, even if it is not perfect (Appendix 1, lines 194–196). This shift is important. It moves the standard from perfection to intelligibility. Munro and Derwing (1995) argue that accent and intelligibility are not the same. A person can have a strong accent and still communicate clearly. Hana's later understanding is therefore more empowering. It allows her to value effective communication without giving up her Ethiopian accent or multilingual identity.

Still, Hana knows that listeners do not always follow this fairer standard. At work, some customers are patient and speak more slowly. She says this makes her feel "strong" (Appendix 1, line 142). Others show impatience on their faces, and this makes her feel "small" (Appendix 1, lines 140–142). She also worries that if someone's English is poor, others may see them as "not smart" (Appendix 1, line 216). The interview does not provide evidence of direct racial discrimination. Even so, Flores and Rosa's (2015) discussion of raciolinguistic ideologies is useful here. Ideas about "appropriate language" are shaped by social power and by listeners' expectations. Part of Hana's difficulty therefore lies not only in speaking, but also in how others listen.

From the perspective of sociolinguistic citizenship, these interactions matter. Rampton et al. (2018) connect language with voice, participation and the right to be heard in unequal conditions. Hymes' (1996) also reminds us that voice is not simply the physical act of speaking. For Hana, citizenship is not only legal status or passing an English exam. It appears in ordinary but high-stakes moments: asking a customer to repeat an order, checking a safety-related word, using Amharic briefly to understand a classroom task, or being treated as a learner rather than a "stupid" person (Appendix 1, line 220). These small moments shape whether she can act with autonomy and dignity.

Hana's case also prevents us from reducing adult English learning to neoliberal self-improvement. Warriner's (2016) work on adult English learning and neoliberal pressure helps explain why Hana is expected to become employable and self-managing. However, if we see her English learning only as adaptation to neoliberal demands, we miss its emotional and moral dimensions. She wants to work, but she also wants to support her family, protect her dignity and speak without fear (Appendix 1, line 212). Her learning is shaped by structural pressure, but it is also driven by care.

7. Critical Discussion and Implications for Teaching

Hana's case challenges a common assumption: that beginner ESOL learners mainly need more language. Of course, Hana does need more English for work, healthcare and public life. But language proficiency alone is not enough if the conditions for being heard remain unchanged. If employers, institutions or teachers interpret slow English as low intelligence, then the problem cannot be explained only as individual linguistic weakness. Hymes' (1996) concept of voice and Rampton et al.'s (2018) idea of sociolinguistic citizenship shift the question. Instead of asking only "How can the learner improve?", we also need to ask how social spaces can listen more responsively to multilingual voices.

This has made me rethink the label "beginner". A1/A1+ can help teachers plan suitable tasks. Yet it can also hide what learners already know and do outside the classroom. Hana's English is beginner-

level, but she is not a "beginner person". She supports her family financially, manages workplace pressure, negotiates life in London and learns how to interact with customers and managers. Low language proficiency does not mean poor judgement, low intelligence or incomplete adulthood. If teachers focus only on CEFR levels, we risk reducing learners to language-deficient individuals. We may miss their knowledge, care and agency.

For ESOL teaching, learners' multilingual resources should be acknowledged in careful and purposeful ways. The "symptoms" example (Appendix 1, line 182) shows that a brief explanation in Amharic did not replace English learning. It helped Hana return to the task with clearer understanding. This echoes Cooke et al.'s (2019) view that ESOL classrooms can give legitimate space to learners' linguistic and social experiences.

However, translanguaging should not be treated as a simple solution. Hana benefited partly because another Ethiopian learner was present. She also benefited because Baytree felt safe. Not all learners share a language, and not all teachers know how to work with languages they do not understand. The key is not simply to say "let students use their languages". Teachers need to design classrooms where multilingual resources support shared participation. For example, students might briefly use a shared language to check meaning, then return to the English task through board work, pictures, reformulation and pair practice.

Teachers can also design tasks that are closer to learners' real lives. For Hana, useful English includes explaining a misunderstanding to a manager, checking allergy information with a customer, asking someone to speak more slowly, or describing pain clearly. These tasks may look basic in terms of grammar. Socially, however, they are complex because they involve power, risk and identity. Beginner ESOL should not be treated as simple content. Low-level classrooms can still deal with high-stakes social practices.

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Appendix 1: Interview Transcript

Transcription conventions:
I = Interviewer;
H = Hana;
(...) = short pause; (long pause) = longer pause;
emmm / erm = hesitation or thinking;
[laughs] = laughter;
[gesture] = non-verbal gesture;
[shows phone] = participant uses phone/photo;
[points] = pointing gesture;

Amharic / Ethiopian terms used:
selam = hello;
enat = mother;
bet = home / house;
ameseginalehu = thank you;
buna = coffee;
jebena = Ethiopian coffee pot;
injera = Ethiopian flatbread;
shiro = chickpea stew;
berbere = Ethiopian spice blend.

001 I: Thank you for talking with me today. This is not a test. I just want to learn about your story, and your English learning experience. You can stop anytime. Is it okay if I take some notes?

002 H: Yes, yes, it's okay. But my English is… emmm… not good. [laughs].

003 I: That's completely fine. You can speak slowly. You can also use your phone, gestures, pictures, or Amharic words.

004 H: Okay. Sometimes I don't know English word. I can show you, maybe. [laughs]

005 I: Yes, that's perfect. And I will not use your real name. Can I call you 'Hana' in my writing?

006 H: Yes, Hana is okay.

007 I: So, can you tell me about this morning? Before you came here?

008 H: Today? Emmm… I wake up early. Maybe six. I drink tea. And I call my mother. Just little bit.

009 I: You called your mother this morning?

010 H: Yes. Because Friday I go school, English class. She always ask me, "You go class today?" [laughs]

011 I: What language do you speak with her?

012 H: Amharic. Always Amharic. I say: *selam enat*. Like, just hello mum. With my mother, emmm… no English.

013 I: And how does it feel speaking Amharic with her?

014 H: Easy. Very easy. I don't think. I just speak. I can say feeling. If I am tired, I say. If I am sad, I say. In English, I need think too much.

015 I: Mm. So Amharic feels easier for feelings?

016 H: Yes. Amharic is… how to say… it is a bet. Home. English is London life.

017 I: "English is London life." What do you mean?

018 H: Because here, everything English. Work, bus, shop, letter. If no English, very hard. You need ask people help all time.

019 I: Tha's so true. and you mentioned your mother. Can you tell me a bit about her?

020 H: My mother is in Ethiopia. She is not very healthy. She has pain… body pain. Some days okay, some days not okay. She cannot work much now.

I: Mm.

H: She is strong woman, but now tired. She do many things before, for me, for family. Now she cannot do too much.

I: And who else is in your family?

H: I have one little brother and two little sisters. My sisters are in school. My brother is young. He is… emmm… [long pause] I don't know English word.

I: That's okay. You can use Amharic or Google Translate.

H: [uses Google Translate] My mother always say, "Esu gena lij new, mechenek yelebetim." [shows phone and it means: he is still a child, he should not worry about life] .

I: So everyone tries to keep him safe?

H: Yes, yes. He is small. He don't need worry. Everyone keep him safe. But me, I am first child. Big sister. So I need worry. [laughs softly]

I: What do you worry about?

H: Money. School. Food. House. Many things. My sisters need books, clothes. My mother need medicine. My brother also need school things. Every two months I send money. Not big money, but I send.

I: Every two months?

H: Yes. I try. London is expensive, but salary here is better than Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, salary is very small. Very small. So I come here. I work.

I: Did someone help you come to London?

H: Yes, my cousin. She live here before me. She say, "Come, maybe you can work here. You need learn English." She help me first time. Airport, room, job, many things. Without her, I don't know. Very difficult.

I: Do you live with your cousin now?

H: Yes. I live with my cousin and three other girls. We share house. Not big. Small room, many people. [laughs softly] London rent is too much.

I: So sharing the house helps with the rent?

H: Yes. We share rent, bills, sometimes food. It is still expensive, but better. Sometimes house is noisy. Everyone work different time. But it is okay. We help each other.

I: What language do you use at house?

H: With my cousin, Amharic. With other girls, sometimes English, sometimes their language. One girl speak Arabic, one speak Tigrinya, one speak little English. So house is many language. [laughs] Sometimes we use Google Translate also.

I: Does living with your cousin make London easier?

H: Yes. She help me read letter, call GP, understand bank, rent. Before, I ask her everything. But I don't want always ask. She is busy also. I want learn English, do myself.

I: So English helps you do more things by yourself?

H: Yes. I love my cousin. She help me too much. But I want be adult. I want do myself. If I can speak English, I can call, ask, read letter, talk to landlord. I feel more strong.

I: You came to London to help your family?

H: Yes. Help family. I come to help. Not only for me. I think my mother, my sisters, my brother. Sometimes I am tired, very tired, but I think, "No, you do for them." So I work. I send money. Every two months, small money, but I send.

I: That is many things for you.

H: Yes. Many things. Sometimes too much. [touches chest] But I am young. I can work now. Maybe this is the time I can work hard. In Ethiopia, salary is small, so if I stay there, I cannot help much. Here is difficult, but I can send something.

I: So London is difficult, but it gives you more chances?

H: Yes, yes. London is not easy. Rent, food, transport, everything expensive. But work money is better. So I think, okay, I stay now, work, learn English, save little by little.

I: Do you think you will stay in London for a long time?

H: I don't know. Maybe not forever. Ethiopia is my bet, my home. My mother is there. My family is there. But now I need work here. Maybe when my mother is better, and my sisters finish school, maybe I go back. I don't know. Step by step.

I: What would you like to do if you go back?

H: Maybe small shop. Maybe coffee place. I don't know English… business? [laughs] Like my own work. Not work for boss.

I: Your own small business?

H: Yes, own small business. Coffee, buna. Maybe food also. Injera, shiro. But first, I need money. I need English. I learn work here. Then maybe one day.

I: You mentioned coffee. Is coffee important in your family?

H: Yes, very important. Wait, I show you. [takes phone, scrolls] This one. This is home. My mother, my auntie. They make buna with jebena.

I: What is happening in the photo?

H: They sit together. Drink coffee. Talk. Laugh. In Ethiopia, coffee is not just coffee. It is family time. You know? People come, sit, talk. It is warm.

I: When you look at this photo, what language do you hear in your mind?

H: Amharic. [laughs] Many women talking. Fast talking. My mother, my auntie, neighbour. They talk, talk, talk. I understand everything. I can joke. I can answer fast. I can be myself.

I: You can be yourself.

H: Yes. In Amharic, I am full. Like I am me. In English, I am small small [...]. I have many things here. [points to head] But words don't come.

I: Mm. Words don't come.

H: Yes. Sometimes I want say more, but English stop me. Like inside big, outside small. [opens hands, then closes them] I don't know how to explain.

I: haha that's fine, that gesture explains it very clearly.

H: [laughs] Because I cannot say.

I: You said earlier that you are the big sister. What does being the big sister mean for you?

H: Emmm… it means I must be strong. Because my mother is tired. My sisters are young. My brother is young. So I feel… [long pause] I don't know English.

I: Take your time.

H: Like… [uses both hands as if holding something up] I want hold family.

I: Hold the family?

H: Yes. Hold family. Make them safe. Like roof. [points upward] I want be like roof for my family.

I: oh I see. That's a very clear image.

H: In Amharic I can say better. In English, I say like this. [laughs softly] I want my mother rest. I want my sisters study. I want my brother have good life.

I: Do you tell your mother when you feel tired?

H: No. [laughs quietly] I say, "I am okay." Because she has pain. I don't want give more worry. Sometimes I want cry, but I don't tell her. I say, "I am okay."

I: Mmm.

H: She do many things for me before. Now I do for her.

I: You said Amharic is home. What languages do you use in your everyday life in London?

H: Amharic and English. Mostly. Amharic with family, cousin, Ethiopian friends. English at work, shop, doctor, bus, everything outside. I understand some Oromo words, but I don't speak. Only little little.

I: Where did you learn some Oromo words?

H: From people. Friends, neighbours before. In Ethiopia, many languages. Some people speak Oromo. I hear, I know small words, but I cannot speak conversation.

I: And English is mostly outside?

H: Yes. English is outside. Work, customer, manager, doctor, letters. English is London life. But Amharic is my real feeling.

I: When you speak Amharic, how do you feel?

H: I feel full. Like I am me. I can joke. can be angry. emmm and I can explain. With my mother, my sisters, I speak fast. I don't stop.

I: And in English?

H: English… [long pause] English makes me small small. I have many things here. [points to head] But words don't come. Sometimes people hear my English and think maybe I don't know. But I know many things. Just English words not enough.

I: That sounds hard.

H: Yes. Because I am adult. I work. I help family. But when I speak English, maybe I sound like child. This is hard.

I: Can you remember learning English in Ethiopia?

H: Yes. In school. Teacher write on board. We copy. Grammar, vocabulary. Like "I am, you are, he is." We read. We write. But speaking, not much.

I: What was speaking English like at school?

H: Scary. If I make mistake, students laugh. Teacher say, "No, wrong." Then I feel bad. So I quiet.

I: You stayed quiet?

H: Yes. I know some words, but I don't speak. Reading maybe okay. Writing little bit okay. Speaking no.

I: So when you came to London, what was different?

H: Very different. People speak fast. Accent different. In school, English is slow. In London, English is real life. First time in shop, cashier ask me something. I don't know. I just say yes. [laughs softly]

I: You just said yes?

H: Yes. Maybe she say, "Do you want bag?" I don't know. I say yes to everything. [laughs] Now funny. Before not funny. I feel like child. I am adult, but I cannot answer.

I: Was that one of the moments when you felt you really needed English?

H: Yes. Many times. Shop, bus, doctor, work, rent letter. At first, I always ask my cousin. "Please call." "Please read letter." "Please help me." She help me, but she also work. I feel bad sometimes. I don't want make her tired.

I: So you wanted to manage more things by yourself?

H: Manage? Sorry?

I: Sorry. I mean, you wanted to do more things yourself.

H: Ah yes. I want do myself. Maybe small things first. Ask in shop. Call GP. Speak at work. Understand rent message. Not everything, but little by little.

I: Can you tell me how you started working at the restaurant?

H: First, I don't work as waitress. First time, I work in kitchen. I wash dishes. Many dishes. Very hot, very busy. I don't need speak too much English there. Just "yes", "okay", "finished", like this.

I: So the kitchen felt safer at first because you didn't have to speak much English.

H: Yes, safer. I was tired, but not too scared. I don't speak customers. I just wash, clean, help kitchen. But , but you know money is not very good.

I: What changed after that?

H: After some time, my English little bit better. I can say simple sentence. Like "Hello", "What would you like?", "One moment please." My manager see I try. He say, "Hana, maybe you try waitress."

I: How did you feel when he asked you to try waitressing?

H: I was afraid. I say, "Me? No, my English no good." [laughs] Because customer speak fast. If I don't understand, I feel bad. But manager say, "Try. I will help you." He is kind.

I: What made you decide to try it even though you were scared?

H: Because waitress money is little better. And sometimes customer give tip. Not always, but sometimes. After work, all waiters share tips. So not only me. Everyone share. But still, better than nothing. Even small money, I am happy.

I: So it was both money and English practice.

H: Yes. Money and English. If I stay in kitchen, I don't speak English much. But waitress, I must speak. It is scary, but I learn fast. Every day same sentence, same question. Slowly I remember.

I: What did your manager do that helped you?

H: He teach me small sentence. Like, "Say this." "Ask this." If customer ask something difficult, he say, "Call me." So I feel not alone. I am very thankful. He give me chance.

I: What kind of change did that make for you?

H: Before, I only wash dishes. No customer see me. I stay back. Now I come front. I speak little bit. I learn more. Maybe I can do more things. Not big big, but for me, it is big.

I: What English do you use again and again with customers?

H: "Hello." "What would you like?" "Anything else?" "One moment please." "Sorry." "Thank you." "Card or cash?" "Do you want receipt?" These every day.

I: Are there any words from work that you had to learn quickly?

H: Many. [laughs] Wait, I show you. [takes phone, scrolls] I take photo of notebook. See? "Receipt", "bill", "tap water", "allergy", "gluten", "spicy."

I: Which of these words felt most important at work?

H: Allergy. Very important. Manager say, "Hana, careful." If customer cannot eat nuts, milk, gluten, I must understand. If I don't know, I ask manager. I don't guess.

I: That sounds like a lot of pressure when your English is still developing.

H: Pressure? Sorry?

I: Sorry. I mean, it sounds difficult and maybe stressful.

H: Ah, yes. Stressful. I feel stress. But I learn. First time customer say "tap water", I don't know. I think, tap? What is tap? I ask manager. He show me. [mimes turning tap] Ah, water from here. Now I know. Small word, but important.

I: When you don't understand a customer now, what do you usually do?

H: Before, I just smile. [smiles and looks down] Because I feel shy. Now I say, "Sorry, can you say again?" Or "One moment, please." Then I ask manager.

I: Does that make you feel a bit less scared because you know what to say?

H: Yes. Less scared. Because I have sentence now. Before, only smile. Now I can say something. Still nervous, but better.

I: How do customers usually respond?

H: Some are kind. They speak slow. Some not patient. Their face is like… [makes impatient face] Then I feel nervous. I feel small.

I: And when customers are patient?

H: I feel good. I feel strong. If I understand, I feel strong. If I don't understand, I feel small. I don't want always quiet.

I: Do you ever use Amharic at work?

H: Sometimes if Ethiopian customer. I say selam. Or ameseginalehu. They smile. I smile. [laughs] But mostly English.

I: Do customers ever ask you about Ethiopia?

H: Sometimes. They ask food, culture. I say injera, shiro, berbere. But English explain is hard. I know taste, smell, everything. But English words not enough.

I: Can you give an example?

H: Like injera. I say, “It is bread,” but not bread. [laughs] It is soft, sour, big. You eat with hand. Shiro is like sauce, chickpea. Berbere is red spice. But in English I explain like baby，emm you know. [laughs softly]

I: How do you feel when you explain Ethiopian food in English?

H: Happy. Because it is my culture. But also shy, because I cannot explain good. In Amharic, I can explain very nice. In English, just small small.

I: You said earlier that you wanted to learn English to do more things by yourself. Is that why you came to Baytree?

H: Yes. My friend tell me Baytree. She say, “Come, Baytree is women only. Very kind.” First time I was nervous. I think, maybe my English too small. But teacher smile. Other women also learning. Some speak better, some same like me. So I feel okay.

I: How long have you been coming to Baytree?

H: Three months. This is my third month. I come Friday only because other days I work. Friday morning I have time.

I: What did you notice in the classroom?

H: Tables. Board. Pictures. Women talking. Teacher speak slowly. She write on board. I like board, because I can see. If only listening, difficult.

I: What helps you most in ESOL class?

H: Emm. Pictures help. Repeating help. Partner help. [laughs] If partner kind, I speak more.

I: Can you remember one lesson you liked?

H: Doctor lesson. GP appointment. Very useful. We practise, “I need appointment.” “I have pain.” “My stomach hurts.” Teacher show body words. [points to head, throat, stomach] Head, throat, stomach, back.

I: Why was that useful for you?

H: Because before, my cousin call GP for me. I don’t like. I feel… emmm… I don’t know word. Like I cannot do myself. I need people all time.

I: You mean you have to ask other people for help?

H: Yes, yes. Always ask help. I don’t like. I want do it myself.

I: Have you called the GP yourself yet?

H: Not yet. [laughs] But maybe next time. I practise. Small step.

I: What is different between work and Baytree?

H: Work is fast. Baytree is slow. At work, I must answer now. No time. At Baytree, I can think. I can ask. I can say, “I don’t understand.” It is okay.

I: And what about Baytree being women-only?

H: Yes, good. I feel comfortable. Women understand. Some have children. Some work. Everyone has story. We make mistake, but it is okay. We laugh, but good laugh. Not bad laugh.

I: When you don’t understand English in class, what do you usually do?

H: First I look. Maybe picture. Then I ask teacher. Sometimes I use phone. Google Translate. English to Amharic.

I: Does it help?

H: Yes, but sometimes funny. Translation strange. [laughs] But it helps first.

I: Can you show me?

H: Yes. [opens translation app] Like “appointment.” I write. Then Amharic. I read. Then I understand. After that I try English sentence.

I: So Amharic comes first sometimes?

H: Sometimes yes. First Amharic for understand. Then English for speak. If only English, I lost. If only Amharic, English no improve. So both.

I: Do you use Amharic with other students?

180 H: If Ethiopian woman is there, yes, small small. Not all time. Only when we don't understand. For example, teacher say new word, like "appointment" or "rent". I look at her, she look at me. [laughs] Then we say in Amharic, "What teacher say?" or "This word means what?" Then one of us check phone, Google Translate, or she explain in Amharic.

181 I: Can you remember one moment?

182 H: Yes. In doctor lesson, teacher say "symptoms". I don't know this word. Very difficult. The Ethiopian woman next to me, she also don't know. We look at picture, body picture, and she say in Amharic, like "sewinetish sitamem, min yisemashal?" （when body not good, what you feel） Then I understand. Ah, symptoms. Like pain, cough, headache. After that, I can say in English, "I have headache," "I have stomach pain."

183 I: So Amharic helped you understand the task first.

184 H: Yes. It helps fast. If teacher explain only English, maybe I still lost. But my friend explain small Amharic, then I can come back to English. We don't stay in Amharic long. Just small bridge. Then we try English sentence.

185 I: What kind of things do you say to each other in Amharic?

186 H: Small things. Like, "What page?" "What we do?" "Teacher say write or speak?" [laughs] Sometimes "How to say this in English?" Or if I know one word, I tell her. If she knows, she tell me. We help each other.

187 I: Do you ever practise English together after that?

188 H: Yes. Maybe first we say in Amharic, then we try in English. For example, I want say, "I need appointment." First I say meaning in Amharic. Then she help me, "No, say I need appointment." Then I repeat. Sometimes we laugh because pronunciation difficult. But good laugh, not bad laugh.

189 I: How do you feel about using Amharic in English class?

190 H: I think good. It helps me not lost. But I know I come to learn English, so I try English. My Amharic is not problem. It help me. It is like… [long pause] like hand. It hold me first. Then I walk English. [laughs softly]

191 I: That is a nice way to explain it.

192 H: Yes. If teacher say "English only", maybe I feel afraid. But small Amharic help me feel okay. Then I can speak more English. So for me, Amharic not stop English. It help me start English.

193 I: Earlier you said English makes you feel "small small". When you think about "good English", what do you think?

194 H: Before, I think good English is British English. No mistake. Nice sound. Fast. Now I think different. Good English is people understand me. Not perfect, but clear.

195 I: Not perfect, but clear.

196 H: Yes. Perfect is difficult. I want useful English. For work, doctor, study, life.

197 I: What about accent?

198 H: Accent? Sorry?

199 I: The way your English sounds. Like Ethiopian English, British English, different sound.

200 H: Ah, yes. My sound. I have Ethiopian sound. Sometimes people say "what?" many times. I feel shy. I think, maybe my sound bad. But teacher say, "It's okay. Speak slowly. Speak clear." So now I think, okay, not perfect. People understand me, that is good.

201 I: Do you feel more confident now?

202 H: Confident? [long pause]

203 I: Like, do you feel more okay to speak?

204 H: Ah, yes. Little bit. Not always. Sometimes I speak like this. [speaks very quietly] Teacher say, "Hana, louder." [laughs] I try.

205 I: When you think about the future, where is English?

206 H: English is important. If my English better, maybe better job. Waitress is okay, but I want more. Maybe childcare. I like children. Or maybe my own small shop.

207 I: Your own small shop?

H: Yes. Maybe coffee shop. Maybe Ethiopian food also. Injera, shiro, buna. I want people know my food. But first money. First English. Step by step.

I: Would that be in London or Ethiopia?

H: I don't know. Maybe Ethiopia. Maybe London first, then Ethiopia. Ethiopia is home. My mother is there. My sisters, my brother. I want make money when young, send money, save money, then maybe go home.

I: What does a good life mean for you?

H: Good life means my family safe. My mother healthy. My sisters study. My brother happy. Enough money. Not rich rich. Just okay. Own small work. I can choose my time. I can help family. I can speak without fear.

I: Speak without fear?

H: Yes. I don't want always be quiet.

I: Is there anything important about your languages or English learning that I didn't ask?

H: Emmm… maybe… people think if English not good, you are not smart. But not true. Many women in Baytree are smart. They have children, work, life. But English is difficult.

I: Mm.

H: For me, I know work, family, money, buna, food, life. But when I speak English, maybe I sound like child. This is hard.

I: That's very important.

H: Baytree help because I feel not stupid. I feel learner. Different.

I: Learner, not stupid.

H: Yes. Learner. My English still small, but I grow. [moves hand upward slowly]

I: How do you feel after talking about this?

H: Tired. [laughs] But good. I never talk long like this in English.

I: You did really well. Thank you for sharing your story.

H: Thank you. Ameseginalehu. It means thank you. [laughs]

I: Thank you again. I'll use a different name for you, and I won't include details that identify you.

H: Okay. Thank you.