

Teachers often have no way of measuring the long-term benefits of their courses. Sometimes, though, the feedback they get after they finish teaching a course lets them know they are on the right track.



Muhaymina Omar (left) and one of her master's degree classmates, Angela Lungu from Malawi, take time out from their studies to relax with a tortoise on Prison Island in the Zanzibar Archipelago.

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explaining the attractiveness of the islands.
“Lots of spices, friendly people, nice beaches,
good weather. It’s very green.”**

Consider the following comments made by students who recently completed a special course in Zanzibar, Tanzania:

“I am now a good communicator and collaborator since I am in this program. You must collaborate and communicate on anything you do.”

“Through the different games and activities I gained a lot of skills such as self-management, responsible decision making, and social skills.”

“I learned valuable life skills that go beyond the classroom. I have developed a greater sense of responsibility and accountability.”

These students participated in a course that ran for 36 weeks for two hours on Saturday mornings. Part of the Kinful program, it brought together students from various local schools to study English, develop critical-thinking skills, and grow in ways that might not be easy to define.

One of the teachers in the course, Muhaymina Omar, experienced the positive effects as well. “It was life-changing,” she said. For Muhaymina, one of the things that set this program apart was that the curriculum was based on social-emotional learning (SEL). She said SEL “helps my students to have critical thinking. They work in collaboration and make decisions.” The students were often given what she called “barriers” and problems that they needed to work through and solve. According to Muhaymina, they learned to manage themselves, respecting one another and keeping their emotions in check in order to work together, and they had to communicate in English. “You don’t have any other place to practice” using English, she told the students, “so you have to do it here!”

Another aspect of the SEL approach that Muhaymina appreciates is that “students use English to give their personal reflections on the activities and their own involvement throughout the program.” She said this is the kind of benefit that the students do not often get in their much larger regular classes during the week. Her weekday classes typically have



Students in the Saturday morning program enjoy a virtual-reality activity.

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more than 50 students, while the Saturday class had 25, almost evenly divided between male and female students.

In the program, the students used English while playing a variety of games that required them to work together to reach goals and gave them opportunities to express their opinions and feelings. All in all, Muhaymina feels that the SEL approach enabled the students to enhance skills such as interpersonal abilities, connection building, social awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making—part of what are sometimes called “power skills”—and come away “better equipped to deal with challenges like diversity, inclusiveness, and anti-bullying.”

A special activity was putting on virtual-reality goggles to watch videos created by students in other countries, including South Africa. Through virtual reality, they could see what students were doing in those countries. “It’s like they do an international exchange in their classrooms,” Muhaymina said. “They see what other students are doing in their schools and how they interact—how they work together.” She hopes that her students will have a chance to create their own videos about their lives in Zanzibar and share them with students in other countries.

Muhaymina’s students live on Unguja, one of the two main islands in the Zanzibar Archipelago. Pemba, the other main island, lies just to the north. The archipelago has been part of Tanzania since the unification of Zanzibar and Tanganyika in 1964. Unguja is located north-northeast of Dar es Salaam, the former capital of Tanzania and still the country’s largest city, and less than 100

kilometers from the mainland. Swahili is the predominant language, and after a downturn in visitors during the COVID pandemic, tourism has once again become popular in Zanzibar.

“We have a wealth of culture,” Muhaymina said, explaining the attractiveness of the islands. “Lots of spices, friendly people, nice beaches, good weather. It’s very green.” She also noted that people who live in Zanzibar come from a variety of backgrounds, making its population diverse. Muhaymina’s message for *English Teaching Forum* readers who haven’t had a chance to visit Zanzibar is simple and direct: “They have to come!”

Although Zanzibar is separated geographically from mainland Africa, teachers there stay plugged in to developments in English language teaching by relying on the internet. One thing that Muhaymina has in common with other English teachers around the world is that she gets a lot of teaching ideas from the American English for Educators Facebook page. “That’s my favorite page,” she said. She recently found suggestions there for using mindfulness in teaching English and is now taking an active interest in exploring ways to incorporate mindfulness to support her students’ learning. She also hopes to develop a workshop presentation based on mindfulness techniques to support English language learning and overall well-being.

While many of the local people spend their time farming or at a nearby park, Muhaymina said that these days she often spends weekends reading and writing as she works on her dissertation for her master’s of education degree in Youth, Gender and Development

Handling the leaves while blindfolded and using English to describe them made the activity meaningful, fun, and memorable.

at The State University of Zanzibar; she has a particular interest in inclusive education. Her studying and her teaching influence each other; for instance, she said that in her own studying, “I don’t like lectures. So I don’t do that to my students.” She prefers to give them pair work and group work, then let them work together—more collaboration.

Muhaymina’s weekday teaching takes place in Mpendae Secondary School, which is about a kilometer from the western coastline of Unguja. At this school, English is the language of instruction in all courses except for those in Swahili and religious studies.

She currently serves as a subject adviser for Swahili and English, and although she teaches only English now, she is capable of teaching other subjects, having majored in linguistics and geography as an undergraduate.

Muhaymina said that studying geography helped her learn new vocabulary, but when it comes to teaching, “English can help me to teach geography, but geography doesn’t really help me to teach English.” She said that if it’s necessary for her to teach another subject, for instance if there is a teacher shortage, “then I will. But always I say, don’t stop me from teaching English. Teaching English in addition to another subject, that’s OK, but not teaching only another subject.”

Like many other English teachers, Muhaymina has looked for ways to overcome the challenges of teaching large classes and sometimes facing a lack of materials for the classroom. One solution has been to take advantage of Zanzibar’s natural local resources. When she was teaching a unit on the environment, for example, she brought in leaves from different species of plants outside their school. Students



Mpendae Secondary School

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wore blindfolds and held a leaf in their hands. They then had to describe its shape, its smell, and how it felt, and then try to identify the plant in English. These were all plants that the students were familiar with, but handling the leaves while blindfolded and using English to describe them made the activity meaningful, fun, and memorable.

Muhaymina has been interested in English since she was a child who tried to read everything she saw that was written in English. “I feel English was in my blood since I was a kid,” she said. There was no internet then and no Kinful program to take part in, but she found other ways to learn: “There was a TV program called *Follow Me!* from Britain,” she said. “It was broadcast on TV every Wednesday evening, and I never missed it.”

As it turns out, Muhaymina was able to visit Britain, in 2009, on an exchange program in Cornwall. She has also been to the United States, as she joined a Fulbright exchange program in 2019, traveling to Nevada and to Washington, D.C. After she completes her degree, she would like another opportunity to travel abroad to further her professional development.

She also hopes to have another chance to teach in the Kinful program, if one is offered again on Unguja. In Zanzibar, the program started in December 2023 under the Tanzanian English Language Teachers Association (commonly referred to as TELTA), supported by funding from the U.S. Department of State.

Muhaymina considers her first experience with the SEL approach a true success for the teachers and for the students. If she needs evidence of the program’s positive impact, she

can always point to more comments from the students, such as this one:

“[The program] taught me that empathy is a key to understanding others. It also ... taught me the importance of building positive relationships and being supportive of others, for example, through some activities we do during the class. Help each other and give direction to each other; no one is left alone.”

This article was written by *English Teaching Forum* staff, with significant input from Muhaymina Omar. We thank Muhaymina for her substantial contributions to this article.