

Not all classrooms are in school buildings. As we have learned during the COVID pandemic, classrooms can be created almost anywhere that teachers and learners are able to connect, in person or virtually.



Danielle Zélin, of Albion, Mauritius, combines English teaching with activities that connect students with the world around them. She is shown here during a Jolly Phonics teacher-training program in 2021.

For Danielle Zélin, who teaches on the island of Mauritius, the classroom is in her home—and all around it.

Danielle runs her own school—the Language Mood English Club—and as a result has freedom to take the curriculum in many directions, and sometimes that means looking right outside. She lives in Albion, not far from Port Louis, the capital city of Mauritius, which is located more than 800 km (over 500 miles) to the east of Madagascar, in the Indian Ocean. Mauritius is home to more than 1.2 million people.

Danielle’s school started as a club on Saturday mornings, with a focus on storytelling, but she now teaches classes to individuals and groups, mainly in the afternoons and evenings after school.

“I always knew I wanted to teach,” she said, but it wasn’t always clear that English would be her area of expertise. As a teenager growing up in Mauritius, she struggled to see the point of reading Shakespeare in her English classes. “That English is old,” she told her mother; “I will not use it in my daily life.” At the time, she much preferred reading French literature.

Years later, though, Danielle saw a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, which she had studied in secondary school, and its power became clear to her. She didn’t have to memorize lines, answer questions, or analyze for a test; she just enjoyed the play and the performance.

In a sense, that is the spirit that she carries into her current teaching. Her students arrive after a day of school, often tired, “so my place is more like a fun place to do like an English Adventure—I like to call it that. We do so many different things together,” she said. She and the students sometimes brainstorm things they want to study or discuss, and often her students tell her, “We want to connect to the world.”

As a result, they frequently study current events and local issues. Danielle lives ten



Scenes in Albion, Mauritius: Keeping the local environment clean is the focus of several projects Danielle's students have taken part in while learning relevant vocabulary.

minutes from the beach and beside what she calls a “mini-forest,” so nature is all around. One recent study topic was the bats that live in the mini-forest (monkeys live there, too, and plenty of birds), and another unit was about controlling trash and preserving the environment. Students got to practice using relevant vocabulary and discussed issues that are part of their daily lives, part of the world around them.

“It’s about knowledge,” Danielle said of her classes, “but English teaching is always there.”

Danielle was raised in Mauritius in a bilingual environment (French and Mauritian Creole), and she said those two languages are still spoken more widely on the island than English. “On the streets of Mauritius you will hear Mauritian Creole and French,” she said. “Rarely in the supermarket, or wherever, will you hear English.” There are some indications of a movement toward wider use of English, she said, and most of Danielle’s students and their parents recognize the importance of English for further study and future careers. Locally, though, Danielle said, “English is spoken at some conferences, in parliament,

and maybe by some doctors, but the main languages are Mauritian Creole and French.”

Danielle explained that on the island, language is in “layers or clusters”: families that speak almost exclusively French (Mauritius was under French rule for nearly a century until 1810); families, like the one Danielle grew up in, that are bilingual; families that speak English along with French and Creole (Mauritius was under British rule after 1810 and became independent in 1968); and families that speak almost exclusively Creole. Other languages are present as well, leading Danielle to say, “In the end, I think our ‘official language’ could be qualified as polyglot-based. I speak English, French, and Mauritian Creole every day to communicate, depending on the situation. And I actually love it!”

She pointed out that one of the challenges for many Mauritian students learning English is that they are bilingual—typically in French and Mauritian Creole—and would benefit from studying English as a foreign language. She said that for the most part, however, English in schools is taught as if students are native speakers of the language.



Some of Danielle’s students participate in a clean-up of Tamarin Beach, Mauritius, as part of The Coral Squad Program.

Danielle's views on teaching and her approaches to her own classes have been shaped by more than 25 years of varied experience. She was trained as an early childhood educator, and she has taught in the Maldives, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates—and Latvia, where her husband is from. In fact, it was in Latvia that she started her first school. She initially had doubts, especially about financial and administrative aspects, but her husband helped out with the business side, and the school, which offered classes in English and French, became a success. She and her husband returned to Mauritius about six years ago, and she has been teaching in her school ever since.

Although Danielle does not conduct formal testing—"I don't do end-of-year exams," she said with a laugh; "I do an end-of-year party"—she does report to parents about their children's learning, and she has prepared students for international tests when they requested her help. Mainly, she said her teaching is less about evaluation and more about "developing a love for the language, being able to use it to express your ideas, and keeping that space where it's safe to make mistakes. My students understand that making mistakes means learning."

When one of Danielle's classes does a unit on a topic of local interest, such as the importance and preservation of coral, she gets to learn right along with them. "That's the best part!" she said. This kind of shared, mutual learning is a feature of her teaching that she likes to highlight. "I am collaborating with the students to explore the language," she said.

Schools in Mauritius follow the Mauritian National Curriculum, with students having to pass an exam to earn a primary-school certificate and move on to secondary school, where Cambridge O and A Levels require more exams. Danielle emerged from that system feeling that English was taught "halfway." In other words, the focus was on reading, writing, and preparing for exams, but she felt that not enough time was spent on

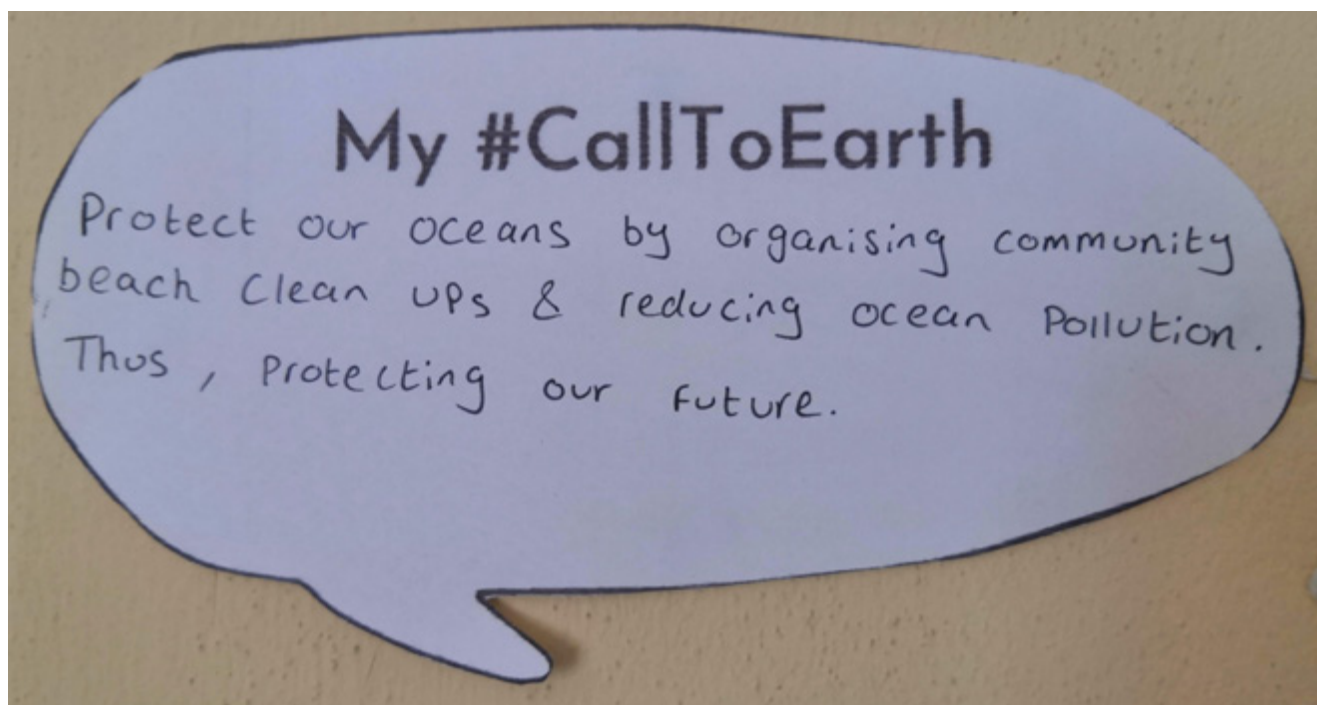
developing speaking and listening skills or just being able to communicate—to use and enjoy the language.

As a result, she describes the content she teaches, whatever the topic, as "English with a purpose." A few years ago, she became a certified educator in the National Geographic Learning Framework. A student asked to learn more about endangered species, and as Danielle was searching for relevant materials, she came across the National Geographic platform and resources, and that led to her enrollment in the certification program.

She said she combines those resources, content from other sources, and her own ideas, but typically a class project begins with an inquiry, and from there the class collaborates to pursue lines of study. Danielle's role is often as a facilitator—an "English coach," she said—to move projects along as students explore and do research, but she is always ready to step in and include language instruction, such as giving opportunities to practice using indirect speech for reporting or correct usage of new vocabulary, as needed.

Among the lessons and exploratory activities she has crafted, intended to sharpen students' English skills while addressing current real-world issues, are these:

- **Colors of Our Island:** Danielle's teen learners take photos and create thought-stories related to the local environment.
- **Harmonious Species:** Students learn about local endangered and endemic species and express ideas through creative art and storytelling; young learners create a fact portfolio.
- **The Coral Squad Program:** A Coral Literacy Education Program for Youth, this is an interactive and immersive way for students from nine to 17 years of age to explore coral-reef ecosystems and functions, the threats they face, and actions students and others can take.



Messages from two of Danielle's students, written for CNN's Call to Earth initiative

Danielle is an alumna of the U.S. Department of State's Online Professional English Network (OPEN) program, having completed a course on Teaching English to Young Learners, and she participates actively in OPEN's Community of Practice. She is also a Jolly Phonics official trainer and consultant; in that role, she has trained teachers in the science of teaching reading and writing to young learners. She has presented at the English Language Teaching and Learning Conference in Mauritius, organized by the U.S. Embassy and the English Speaking Union Mauritius,

where she is an executive committee member. She is hopeful that in-person conferences will be possible in Mauritius again soon, and as this article was being written, she was preparing to conduct whole-school teacher-training workshops. According to Danielle, the "cascading knowledge" from her participation in the OPEN program has enabled her to take part actively and productively in these organizations and events.

Danielle described the pace of life on the island as "laid back and soothing," with people spending free time on the beach, taking day trips to nearby islets, hiking—and cooking. "We are a little island with influence from all around the world," she said, "so the variety of food is incredible, and knowing how to cook is a real hobby here."

She added that Mauritians are "a very musical population, so you will hear music when walking in the street or when traveling by public transport." In fact, music is a core part of Danielle's life. She sings with a jazz band called the Cool Quartet and Mrs. D, which performs at parties and other events. "I was born in music," she said, mentioning that her father, a guitarist, often played music by Cliff Richard and The Shadows when she was

growing up and that singing was a big part of family time at home. When she began teaching young learners, it was only natural for her to bring songs along into the classroom.

Danielle acknowledged that she still uses many of the same techniques she used when she started out—at the time, singing and storytelling were a major part of her teaching to young learners—but that, even so, her teaching now is much different, although some elements are still the same. She said, “The change is more like expansion. I started by following a curriculum, and now I’m fully fledged in creating my own. [But] whatever I was using in my first years of teaching, I’m still using it. I’m just adding and creating.”

Those changes and that expansion of her teaching repertoire have led to a firm philosophy of teaching. According to Danielle, her philosophy is “to develop and nurture the love of the English language in my students. And since my students are mostly young and teen learners, using a mix of creative, fun, hands-on, and interactive activities and projects to keep them engaged and motivated toward learning English has proven to be a

golden key in their learning process.” She said she wants her students to be able to “go back home after each session feeling that they learned something new and purposeful, able to share it with others around them and apply it to their daily life.”

She feels particular pride when she sees that her students are able to apply what they learn in her classes to other parts of their lives, such as their school courses. “Sometimes at school they write about things we discussed or studied, about bats or the carbon cycle,” she said. “One thing I wish for my learners, or any other youth I touch, or other educators I touch, is learning English with a purpose.”

Nature. Music. English language teaching. For Danielle Zélin, it all comes together, with a purpose.

This article was written by *English Teaching Forum* staff; we thank Danielle for her cooperation and patience while the article was being written.

Photos courtesy of Danielle Zélin