MY CLASSROOM COTE D'IVOIRE

In the busy classroom of the International University of Grand-Bassam (IUGB), Instructor Mohamed Lekrama, no matter the unit or discussion in progress, is guided by a powerful principle: reflection. It resides in the eager eyes and smiles of his students, the words that they craft, and the pauses that ensue. It prods and often propels his students outside of their comfort zones. Reflection, according to Mr. Lekrama, is a simple but transformative tool. He draws on the work of the linguist Earl W. Stevick: "Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom" (Stevick 1998, 119).

Mohamed Lekrama stands in front of the entrance to the International University of Grand-Bassam.

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Delving into that communicative space that exists between teacher, student, and the subject material is at the core of the pedagogy of this Mauritania-born teacher, who first came to Cote d'Ivoire in 2017 after many classroom journeys of his own. Since his first English class in 2000 at the age of 14, he was motivated to learn English, a language then revered in Mauritania as the language of globalization. He was fortunate to have a teacher who, unlike many he had previously encountered, encouraged him in his learning. Together, these things helped him prevail after his college graduation in 2009, when he was under pressure to choose a career considered more befitting a male from a middle-class family, such as the military. Teaching, although a respected vocation, was not encouraged by his family due to its relatively low pay. Mr. Lekrama continued to be resolute, driven by a desire to try in his own small way to instigate a positive change in education in his country. Upon reflection nearly 20 years later, he offers, "I think the reason I wanted to be a teacher is because I wanted to be a different teacher than the ones I have experienced myself as a learner."

The educational context Mr. Lekrama experienced as a student didn't always encourage creativity and intellectual freedom, and it is the antithesis of the one he now strives to foster at IUGB. This university's reputation for preparing students for the U.S.-style academic system, together with the opportunity for him to develop quality tertiary-level teaching experience, attracted him to IUGB and Cote d'Ivoire.

Nestled in the heart of Grand-Bassam, a UNESCO town that was once the French colonial capital on the southeast coast, IUGB opened in 2005 as the first American-style university in the country. With generally small class sizes, IUGB is a popular choice for international students. Of a current total of 829 students, it attracts an eclectic collection of cultural backgrounds (students from 22 nations that besides Cote d'Ivoire include Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Lebanon) and affords Mr. Lekrama and his students a culturally rich platform upon which to learn from one another. Currently teaching sections of Grammar, Oral Communication, and Listening, Mr. Lekrama explains that for him, his role is so much more than being solely

A view of the campus at IUGB

Mr. Lekrama engages with students in his grammar class during a small-group activity.

an "expert" in a particular field; as a teacher, it is not enough to simply know the "whats" of one's material. He believes that a teacher who is going to dynamize a communicative classroom must plunge deeper into the reflective process. It begins with asking: "Why am I teaching this?"

It might sound simple enough, almost too obvious a question. Teachers in Cote d'Ivoire (and around the world) struggle to catch their breath with overloaded schedules and excessive classroom sizes (in Cote d'Ivoire, public secondary-school classrooms can have more than 100 students), let alone find time to reflect.

However, by taking time to think about his purpose as a teacher and ask more "whys" and "hows," Mr. Lekrama finds that whole new dimensions can open up. His self-reflection includes asking: "What is my purpose for teaching this? What is my end goal? Is it simply because *this* is on the required syllabus and *this* is what I have to teach in 45 minutes? Or is there a deeper purpose? What if how I teach the required material could also elicit a more creative thought process with my students? How might I do that?"

Mr. Lekrama has found that the process has enhanced his sense of self-awareness as a teacher and, in turn, positively impacts his students. For example, when encouraged to reflect on the whys and the hows of their own learning process (e.g., "Why am I studying the real conditional? How can I apply this new knowledge?"), students are more likely to make connections with the learning material and each other. It also mitigates some of the challenges that he faces as a teacher.

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One such is that many of his students are accustomed to a classroom culture focused on rote learning. Mr. Lekrama can indeed have his work cut out when trying to encourage his learners to engage in critical thinking and reflection. By virtue of their past experiences, they expect that as the teacher, he will do the "thinking work."

But observe one of Mr. Lekrama's classes and you will see a prepared facilitator making sure that thinking work is shared. Take a simple grammar concept such as the real conditional. During an 80-minute class in this airy and spacious classroom, it is easy for the students to forget the bustling, sand-covered streets steps from the tended campus lawn and their classroom window. The sounds from the overpacked minibuses, the ubiquitous "woro woro" (orange taxis that have seen better days), and vendors all disappear as an exciting collaborative group discussion ensues. It is about scientific truths, and it begins with Mr. Lekrama, as he writes on the whiteboard:

If you heat ice, it melts.

Mr. Lekrama: What scientific truths do you know that are similar to this?

Student 1: If you breathe in the sea, you die.

Mr. Lekrama: Good. If we take in air under water, we die. Is this a scientific truth?

Student 2: Yes, because you die.

Mr. Lekrama: So, how we use language gives us different meanings and truths?

The above is just a snapshot, but it shows how Mr. Lekrama brings to life a collaborative dialog. He takes a grammar concept and encourages his learners to actively reflect upon the grammatical tenet, making their own meaning by contributing and sharing their understanding. They see grammar less as a set of rules and more as a way of autonomously expressing themselves.

Mr. Lekrama is inspired by the applied linguistics scholar Diane Larsen-Freeman and her concept of "grammaring" (Larsen-Freeman 2014), where learning grammar is a dynamic and active process in which a learner strives to apply the grammatical tenets to real-world concepts. An example of how his teaching reflects this student-centered approach is a lesson he conducts on modal verbs. He starts by asking his learners (based on their background knowledge) to brainstorm all the modal verbs they know. Next, he gives his learners a relatable context and then a real-world freewriting task that they can relate to: *Imagine you work in a local hotel. Write a list of the guest rules at the hotel.* His objective as a teacher is to inject a degree of meaningfulness for his students. In their groups, whether they come up with, "Guests **must** check out before 11 a.m." or "Guests **might** check out before 11 a.m.," Mr. Lekrama asks them to reflect upon their choice of modal verb. For example, "Why did you choose *must*? What is your message to the guests by using that modal verb?" In this way, he contextualizes the content and gives learners a chance to use the language with no judgment—to reflect on their own language. As Mr. Lekrama says, "With reflection on content, it is not about the activity but what we can do with it."

Like many educators in African francophone countries, Mr. Lekrama finds that he has to think creatively about ways to offer his learners the opportunity to practice English outside the formal classroom. Capitalizing on his students' enjoyment of social media, he encourages them to "follow" and "like" pages that are exclusively English. The objective is that they will accrue more English feeds

on their social media "walls." It is a simple example that epitomizes Mr. Lekrama's viewpoint that there is power in the "small acts of language development." What he shows his students through this and similar exercises is that big achievements such as mastering another language start with small steps.

Mr. Lekrama appreciates how his own incremental path as a learner has helped him develop as a teacher since he began his career in 2012. As an undergraduate student at the University of Nouakchott, Mauritania, he majored in English and English Literature. In those days, he felt he was not encouraged enough to critically think and reflect on his learning process. "By seeing what not to do in a classroom, I have learned what to do," he says. He references a common saying heard by teachers in his native Mauritania, "My commodity is sent back to me." For Mr. Lekrama, this statement, perhaps more fitting in a banking lexicon, conceives the teacher as a "depositor" and the student as "depository." In this sense, the relationship maintained is that of domination dependence instead of creativity and independent learning.

He began to consolidate his belief in the importance of quality and humane education at Colorado College, where he taught Arabic, as the first Mauritanian Fulbright Language Teaching Assistant. Upon returning to Mauritania, he spent two years teaching English in the rural region of Adrar and realized that if he was going to have any degree of influential change in his profession, he needed more experience and formal training. Obtaining a second Fulbright scholarship, Mr. Lekrama pursued a master's degree in TESOL from SIT Graduate Institute, formerly known as the School for International Training, something that today he calls "one of the best decisions I made in my life."

Mr. Lekrama quickly embraced the focus on his role as a facilitator of learning. In that role, he is part of an ever-changing dynamic, a spacious triangle that is formed between *I* (the teacher), *thou* (his learners), and *it* (the subject matter); see Hawkins (2002) for more on this concept. The educational culture to which Mr. Lekrama had been so accustomed, emphasizing memorization and with little awareness of the thought capacities of that

Mr. Lekrama at his desk

There is a common denominator: teaching and learning are not separate entities.

"depository," was replaced by a shifting in thinking about the nature of learning.

At SIT, Mr. Lekrama was encouraged to step outside his comfort zone and learned to incorporate the word *humanistic* into his own pedagogical lexicon. He saw that real learning happens when his teaching style embraces the many dimensions of a learner—a human being (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual).

Since then, he has been an active participant in national and local professional-development opportunities in Cote d'Ivoire. In 2019, he presented a workshop at the national teaching conference (CINELTA Conference) on The Grammar of Choice: From Rules to Reasons, where he brought to life the active process of Larsen-Freeman's grammaring. He has also presented on Connecting Teaching to Learning: What, How & Why?, sharing with teachers the importance of being cognizant of the types of questions they ask their learners, and inviting them to consider the power of reflection, both as teachers and by encouraging it in their learners.

Locally, Mr. Lekrama has been an active co-facilitator of an English Teachers' Club in Grand-Bassam. Started in 2019, this 25-member professional group of public secondary-school teachers is still in its nascence. However, the Saturday morning sessions have served as an opportunity for local teachers to share best practices and find a much-needed degree of community.

Whatever the topic, whatever the audience, there is a common denominator: teaching and learning are not separate entities. Stand in the doorway of one of his classes, and it is clear to see—and hear. They are merged in the soundtrack of reflection, be it noise or silence. They are part of an active, humanistic, and meaningful process, and for Mohamed Lekrama, it is best discovered in all the many places in a classroom, "inside and between."

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Photos by Elaine Kerry