MY CLASSROOM ETHIOPIA

Dawit Negeri has been teaching in the English Department at Ambo University for the past five years. With a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Mr. Negeri is familiar with the subject, using his knowledge to share with students the importance of acquiring this global language.

Dawit Negeri at the podium in his classroom

Photo by Eve Smith

The entrance to Ambo University

With about 30 hours of actual classroom time per week, Mr. Negeri divides his attention between three separate sets of learners. The first is non–English majors who are required to take "Common Course" English classes, as English is the medium of instruction in Ethiopia's higher-education system. For this group, Mr. Negeri teaches Basic Writing Skills, a class that all undergraduate students must take, regardless of their majors and English ability.

Mr. Negeri also teaches in the U.S. Department of State's English Access Microscholarship Program, working with local high school students on Saturday mornings through innovative and engaging teaching practices. Begun at Ambo University in 2014 through a partnership with the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa, the Access Program is a practice in sustainable education designed to make students entering the tertiary system more comfortable with English and more skilled at using it.

But Mr. Negeri's main teaching focus is on the university classes of English majors he instructs in the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Of his overall teaching workload, he said, "It is a lot of different approaches to the same topic, but I enjoy the variation it provides me with as a teacher."

It was during his younger years that Mr. Negeri knew he wanted to be an English teacher. Encounters with missionaries in his Western Ethiopian hometown of Gimbi—where he met his wife, Ababo, now an English teacher in an Ambo high

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school—along with a strong desire to help others, brought him to this early conclusion. Whenever he was asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Mr. Negeri never hesitated with his answer. Now, years later, he says, "When I graduated with my master's degree, I remember calling up my elementary school teacher and telling him that I was now an English instructor at Ambo University. He said he couldn't believe it, but of course was proud of me."

In Ethiopia, students do not choose the major they study or the university they attend because a government directive fills the needs of development through individualized placements into particular tracks. For motivated teachers such as Mr. Negeri, this is viewed as an opportunity, not as a limitation. During his time at Ambo University, he has taught a variety of classes, from Advanced Speech to Basic Writing, and from Comprehensive Reading to Introductory Listening. But a common theme that permeates the disciplines he teaches is his dedication to both the students and the materials, as he makes every effort to correlate the two through progressive pedagogy and modern methodology.

Located in the heart of the Ambo University campus is Classroom #41, where each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday Mr. Negeri and his English-major students meet for a two-hour session. The room comfortably holds about 30 students, but his class is crowded with the 41 on the roster. On most days the room is hot, with windows that open but unfortunately face towards laundry and cooking facilities, which emit steam that seemingly affects all five senses. At the front of the classroom, however, is

Main road of the Ambo University campus

Mr. Negeri, eager for the day's lesson. He brings a variety of his own materials to share with students, although the classroom is equipped with only a dry-erase marker and a whiteboard.

The opportunity to teach a variety of classes allows Mr. Negeri to experiment in one while refining in another. For example, he likes to experiment with idioms, which he uses to get students to think as they enter early for their classes. He writes an idiom on the board and has students come up with possible meanings as they settle in for the day's lesson. For the English majors he teaches, he expands upon this practice, asking students to use the idiom themselves either in speech or in writing, incorporating it into their exercises and making it their own. He said, "To college students, outright games may seem a bit elementary, but if you can make something fun without the label of a 'game,' then it goes to liven up the class a bit." Mr. Negeri fully understands the effect of fun and engaging activities in a class that many students did not willingly choose to enroll in, as well as one with limited resources and support. Simple things like creating enjoyable lessons about idioms go a long way in a classroom that has no books, computers, or connectivity.

Electricity is unreliable in Ambo, so generators at the university are running most of the time during the day. This does not directly affect the light in a classroom, which has an entire wall of windows. But providing materials for the students can be difficult; rarely are copies handed out, and the use of computers is virtually nonexistent. Explaining how he copes, Mr. Negeri said, "It was the same case when I was a student, so I am accustomed to what many Westerners would view as limitations, having to constantly figure out work-around solutions to keep my students engaged while following the prescribed curriculum." Mr. Negeri uses other techniques such as varying the seating arrangements and using group-pairing to incorporate constructive teaching practices, having the students take charge of their learning environment and not fall victim to the limited infrastructure.

Within the English Department as a whole, there are many fewer women than men: only two instructors out of 40 are female, and there are many more male students than female students. Taking these numbers into account, Mr. Negeri often arranges his classes in groups, with at least one female student in each group. Eight women in a class of 41

The library at Ambo University

would suggest an imbalance in participation, but through the group arrangement, Mr. Negeri has found that the female student in each group frequently speaks more than her male counterparts.

Mr. Negeri described a recent lesson he taught in which a foundation of introductions gradually elevated to simple conversation. Role-playing partners (one male and one female) first practiced casual greetings with one another in front of the class—for example, strangers passing on the street or long-lost friends reuniting. As the class progressed, the groups turned from two members to four, with expanded dialogue between participants—two couples on a date or family members sharing a walk. Mr. Negeri said that "having the students speak in front of their peers creates authentic learning practices so that others can hear the level of their classmates, not simply comparing themselves with my ability, which may be viewed as much stronger." This practice also doubles as a public speaking opportunity, as most of the speaking in typical classes in Ethiopia is limited to teacher-student/question-answer dialogue that does not truly foster sustainable language development.

Because Mr. Negeri teaches such a variety of classes, he rarely gets the chance to teach students in consecutive years and therefore is not able to observe their growth in English. Within the rural landscape of Ambo, there is little practical use for English outside the classroom, making English classes that much more valuable for students' language development. Mr. Negeri said, "I wish I could see the progression which takes place, but for my scheduling, it is difficult to see my former students after I have taught them." With a tight-knit group of teachers in the department who can be viewed more as friends than as colleagues, he is able to get sporadic updates on former students. But he still wishes he could reunite with them in an academic setting, able to capitalize on their language development, which he helped to strengthen.

A sustainable future lies in the education of my people.

The teaching and learning environment within Ethiopia, and especially at Ambo University, can be described as challenging. The country is in a developmental phase that has seen the number of universities jump from three to thirty-three in a ten-year span. With such rapid growth, the infrastructure is lacking in some areas, but motivated teachers—including Mr. Negeri—are moving education in a positive direction. They are using the tools they learned in similar settings years ago to process solutions rather than dwell on adversities.

Asked about his future plans, Mr. Negeri sticks to this optimistic narrative, still following that vision from the time when he was a fourth-grader hoping to achieve that which he now practices. And his dream endures. He said, "I hope to continue my own education and obtain a PhD so that I will continue to be able to help my country through teaching, knowing that a sustainable future lies in the education of my people."

This article was written by **Matthew Jellick**, an English Language Fellow teaching in Ethiopia. He completed his first year at Ambo University and has returned to Ethiopia for a second year, at Dire Dawa University. You can follow his path @MJellick.

Photos by Matthew Jellick

Note: To learn more about the English Access Microscholarship Program (mentioned on page 44), go to: exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/english-access-microscholarship-program