

Each morning, Catherine Njau walks up a steep dirt road on the side of Mount Kilimanjaro to Mboni Secondary School. She has taught English there for 15 years, yet she constantly strives to update her teaching methods and sees herself as a modern teacher in an environment where traditional teaching methods are still the norm.



Catherine Njau on the parade grounds in front of the main building of Mboni Secondary School

Mboni Secondary is a government-run school in a rural part of Northern Tanzania. Following the British system, the school provides four years of O-level lower-secondary education to students who have already completed seven years of primary education. While some of the school's 238 students come from the villages near the school, others live farther away, with travel times of over an hour between their homes and the school. Like Ms. Njau, they often walk to school from villages lower down the slopes of the mountain.

In Tanzania, the national government assigns teachers to schools, which means that they are often sent to teach in faraway regions and then frequently request transfers, trying to get assignments closer to their hometowns. Ms. Njau is lucky to have been assigned to a school in the community where she grew up, and she has taught there since the start of her career. Like the majority of her students, she is Chagga, a tribe that is indigenous to the part of Northern Tanzania where Mboni is located. She uses her understanding of her students' culture to help them succeed in school. The fifth of seven children, she was responsible for taking care of her younger sister. When she got to secondary school, she had to work to pay her own school fees, so she understands the impact that family obligations and financial pressures can have on her students' lives and educations.

At the end of her four years of O-level, she scored too low on the national exams in mathematics and bookkeeping, which meant she could not study business, as she had intended. However, her results on the English test were better. A teacher encouraged her to follow her strengths and "take the subject that seems simple so you can go far," advice that Ms. Njau now passes on to her own students. She continued her studies as an English major and passed the difficult national examinations before studying for her teaching diploma.

"I felt inside of my heart that if I worked hard on this, I would be a good teacher," she says, reflecting on her time at Marangu Teachers

Training College, just down the mountain from Mboni. "I believed in myself, that if I had struggled with all these difficult situations, I would be able to teach and help others who face the same situations as I experienced."

Ms. Njau currently teaches students in their final year of O-level schooling, grouped into two streams according to their overall academic performance. She has three 80-minute periods per week with each group, preparing them for the high-stakes examinations that will determine whether they can continue their educations. Students who perform well on the exams can continue on to two years at an A-level upper secondary school, while those who don't pass will find jobs in their community, most often as farmers.

One reason the exams are so difficult is that the language of instruction in Tanzanian public schools switches from Swahili during primary school to English in secondary school. Ms. Njau considers this her students' biggest challenge. The national exams are conducted in English as well, which means the students' performance hinges on their English abilities for all subjects except Swahili language and literature, despite just four years of studying with English as the medium of instruction. Most secondary students struggle with basic conversational exchanges when they speak English, so the prospect of studying difficult subjects like history and chemistry in English is daunting.

To better prepare her Swahili-speaking students for the challenges they will face in secondary school, including starting English-medium classes, Ms. Njau teaches an intensive course each summer. Later, as her students near the end of their time at Mboni, she helps them prepare for the national exams, which are written by the National Examinations Council of Tanzania, a branch of the Ministry of Education, but marked and invigilated by trained local teachers. She teaches her students vocabulary that appears frequently, encourages them to study the past exams on file in the library, and has them work in groups to create posters that summarize the works of literature they will be tested on.



Ms. Njau helps her students as they work in groups.

She displays their posters permanently in the library, where they help other students for years.

Ms. Njau prides herself on being a modern teacher and is constantly trying new ways to encourage her students to communicate in English during class. In the traditional Tanzanian teacher-centered style of education, the teacher enters the room and lectures, while the students are expected to just copy notes verbatim from the board. “Students don’t have many activities to do,” she says. “But once you come to my classroom, you find that many students are involved in doing different activities inside the classroom.” In fact, she recently incorporated three distinct activities into the presentation stage of a single 80-minute lesson, with students improvising a role play, answering discussion questions in groups, and completing a continuation paragraph, where the students wrote the outcome they imagined based on the first three sentences of a story.

All of this happens in a classroom equipped with rows of wooden desks and chairs lined up

in seven columns with just two aisles between them. There is a blackboard, but no textbooks, so Ms. Njau creates her own lesson plans based on the topics outlined in the national syllabus. When asked about the materials she uses to teach, she lists chalk, paper, and marker pens, and then explains that her most important resource is her students themselves, who help facilitate their peers’ learning. For example, she assigns students to lead energizers at the start of each class; she also has students explain what they learned as the conclusion to each lesson. Students also listen actively to one another during classroom presentations and have developed a culture where they feel comfortable correcting their peers when they notice an error.

Despite the newness of her methods, Ms. Njau says students respond well. In her classroom, students move, sing, play games, and speak loudly. Even the students who are normally disengaged become lively when she teaches. “They love it, and they join me,” she says. She takes the noisiness of her classroom as a sign of success, since it shows that her students are building their confidence.

Ms. Njau takes a proactive approach to finding new techniques to try in her classroom. She searches the Internet on her laptop when the cellular network she uses to connect is strong enough, and she reads books and magazines, then tries to implement the activities she reads about with her own students. She thinks that in ten years, teachers throughout Tanzania will be using participatory methods in their classes. As the Kilimanjaro regional coordinator of the Tanzanian English Language Teachers Association, she conducts workshops to share with other teachers the methods she has learned, but she encourages teachers who don't have access to professional-development opportunities to read and try new ideas on their own. She believes that by changing their teaching techniques, teachers can change their schools, their communities, and eventually the whole society.

In order to improve her skills and increase her teaching certification from a teaching diploma to a bachelor's degree, she started taking online classes in English linguistics and literature from the Open University of Tanzania earlier this year. While she doesn't expect to receive her degree until 2021, she's already incorporating what she is learning in her university studies into her teaching and has realized that the national syllabus

is compatible with a competence-based approach to language teaching.

Ms. Njau is committed to creating an environment where her students have the resources to develop themselves as well. She has always given pens and exercise books to students who need them, but she wanted to do more. In 2013, she wrote a Peace Corps Partnership Project grant that led to the building of a library so that students would have access to books and agency over their own learning. This independence is particularly important in a country where students don't have textbooks, instead relying exclusively on their teachers' lectures and notes copied from the board. When the library opened, Ms. Njau moved her desk from the teachers' room to the library, and she now serves as the librarian, helping students find books, answering their questions, and encouraging them to talk to her in English.

With one room for book storage and another with large tables and chairs, the library serves as a meeting point for students from all four forms, who regularly come to participate in one of the many clubs Ms. Njau facilitates. The open and inviting space is a rarity in a country where classes of over 50 students are the norm and students sometimes have to share desks



Ms. Njau established the library to give students more agency over their own educations.

during class. Every Wednesday, the two dozen members of the English Club come to play games and sing songs, while the 15 students who make up the Storytelling Club practice telling traditional stories in English, Swahili, and Chagga. Initially, Ms. Njau led the club meetings, but now the students are more likely to lead the activities themselves. The clubs even present their dramas, songs, and stories during the morning assemblies held on the school's parade grounds, helping to establish a culture of English throughout the entire school.

Ms. Njau also cares about students' personal health and well-being. Together with her husband, the school's headmaster, she leads an after-school life-skills course, where students learn how to make healthy decisions and plan for their futures. She pays particularly close attention to the needs of her female students and teaches them about health and empowerment. Ms. Njau has partnered with a women's group to provide girls at the school with personal hygiene products. This project has led to a significant increase in female students' attendance. Most of the women from the group use the income they earn from this partnership to pay their children's school fees.

Ms. Njau sees herself as a role model for her students and regularly discusses the importance of English with them, using her own life as an example. "I am proud to speak with them openly about how English has helped me and changed my life," she says, discussing how she used her English skills to write grants to fund her projects. "Through English, I managed to write different projects. Those projects still exist and are helping the community and my school." She encourages other teachers to start working to better their communities with whatever resources they have available, since it was her work on volunteer projects that opened the door to increased opportunities, such as grant funding. "You shouldn't wait to be paid," she advises. "You need to have the spirit of volunteering."

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Photos by Riah Werner



Mboni students walking home from school