

The classrooms at Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara are just off the beach, 25 meters from the Indian Ocean. A wired, slatted fence separates the beach from the school buildings and keeps out some of the windblown sand. We are in Toamasina, the second-largest city in Madagascar, yet there are no sounds of traffic, only the voices of 10th- to 12th-graders, and every 30 seconds or so, the thundering boom of a wave rolling over. Nobody at this secondary school notices that noise. It happens every day, all day.



Josiana Andriantsalama (left) and Niry Razafimamonjy at the entrance to their school, Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara, in Toamasina

Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara ... is the largest secondary school in the country, with over 4,000 students.

Niry Razafimamonjy and Josiana Andriantsalama share teaching duties for one group of the English Access Microscholarship Program at Jacques Rabemananjara. Access, as the program is usually called, is a U.S. Embassy–sponsored program in which teens receive two years of after-school English instruction with a focus on career skills, collaborative learning, project work, and critical thinking.

Josiana is a recent pedagogical university graduate and just started teaching in 2018, but she has leaped into the profession fearlessly. In addition to Access, she teaches seven English lessons per day at Jacques Rabemananjara, and these she supplements with a few classes at other schools. Though her father works as a bricklayer, her mother is also a teacher. “Actually,” she says, “there are many teachers in my family. Like my grandparents, my uncle, my aunt as well.” She prepares her lessons at home in the evenings. She has no time for going out. “I’m really busy,” she says. “It’s really tiring, but I love it.”

In contrast, Niry, Josiana’s Access teaching partner, is anything but new to the profession.

Niry has been teaching for 30 years and training teachers for 20. She is currently the director of Toamasina’s Teaching Resource Center. The center is under renovation, but when it is functioning, Niry says that it helps “English teachers from public and private schools to cope better with their work. They can borrow books, documents. They can record listening cassettes, and mainly they can ask for advice about the teaching points with which they have problems.” In the past, when funding was more abundant, Niry traveled to schools in order to observe and advise teachers. Often these schools lay in far-flung villages. After all, Madagascar is big, about the size of France. “We even went to remote places by boat,” she says. “We sometimes walked or rode motorbikes.” Sometimes schools had just one English teacher.

Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara, on the other hand, has a dozen or more. It is the largest secondary school in the country, with over 4,000 students. Still, classrooms here are basic: blackboard and chalk, a wet rag to clean the board. No glass covers the windows, only wooden latticework or shutters. The doors stay open and suck in the cool breeze. Often



Pousse-pousse drivers gather at the beach facing the Indian Ocean outside Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara.



A slatted fence separates Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara from the beach and the Indian Ocean.

The doors stay open and suck in the cool breeze.

more on mingles), with all students on their feet and wandering around the dance floor, finding speaking partners.

Traditional English classes around Madagascar use mostly the grammar-translation method. Usually there aren't any textbooks. Much of the time, the teacher writes sentences on the board; learners copy them into notebooks. Group work and pair work are rare. A mingle is rarer still. One teacher, in fact, from a school in another city, informed me that "it is impossible to move students around in a large class. It is dangerous. It disturbs the neighbors." It certainly is more difficult with 70 students than with 25, but not impossible.

Josiana demonstrates this with her Brain Break activities at intervals during the lesson. Students stand—even classes of 100 can stand up—and engage in breathing and stretching exercises to get the blood flowing. Josiana also likes Simon Says, an excellent listening-comprehension game that can get entire classes doing physical actions, right near their desks.

Niry and Josiana keep the students busy throughout the lesson, trading off activities, a coordinated team. They have prepared ahead by talking out the Access themes by telephone. Niry usually takes the Wednesday afternoon class, and Josiana takes Saturdays. Josiana admires Niry's knowledge and breadth of experience; Niry likes working with Josiana "because she's young and has a sense of initiative and some vision."

They enjoy speaking activities, which many teachers in Madagascar avoid because classes are large or because they don't speak much English with students, using instead Malagasy or French.

French is built into the Malagasy education system. (*Malagasy* is the word used to describe

there is no electricity or even working lights. Students sit two, three, even four at wooden desks with attached benches. Regular classes are stocked with upwards of 70 students. The secondary-school English curriculum is new, designed in the last several years, and features not only dialogues and grammar but also games. Josiana has found ways to integrate into her classes favorite activities such as miming and guessing or reading aloud.

Happily, the Access program is capped at 25 students. The smaller class size is a luxury for Niry and Josiana, and it gives them flexibility.

On the Saturday in May 2019 when I observe the class, the Access teachers arrange the wooden desks into a U-formation, transforming the middle of the classroom into open space, what I think of as the "dance floor" setup. That kind of space is always helpful and, in a *four-hour* lesson, crucial.

The lesson is kind of a fast-paced variety show. Students learn about professions and careers, not only developing vocabulary, but also expressing opinions about potential future jobs. They use their imaginations, too. At one point, Niry gives each student a card with a profession written on it. In this role play, each student has to talk to several others, asking questions and conjuring details about that job. This is all done in a *mingle* format (see *English Teaching Forum*, Volume 52, Number 2, for

“I’ve always said to my students, when you meet someone in the streets, they’re not going to tell you, ‘Put this sentence into the past’ or ‘Put this sentence into the negative.’ But they are going to ask you, ‘Where is the library? Where is the town hall?’”

things of or from Madagascar, such as the people or language.) Or you might say that Malagasy education is built around the French system, nearly 60 years after independence. Both are official languages, but all instruction, except Malagasy language, is delivered in French—rather suddenly—beginning in grade three. English is not introduced until grade seven, and then only a few hours a week. “Consequently,” Josiana says, “when they [the students] arrive at school, their English level is very low.” However, attending secondary school is a success in itself: the average adult in Madagascar completes only 4.4 years of schooling (see <https://www.unicef.ca/en/dorlys-journey-a-lesson-in-determination>).

In secondary school, all students study English a couple hours per week. In grade 12, they take the all-important Baccalauréat exam, known as *le bac*, just like in France. Depending on which educational focus students choose, *le bac* may include or exclude English. Many

students will not be motivated to learn English if it doesn’t appear on their exams.

Still, Josiana says, in Access, “We speak only English.” Niry adds, “I’ve always said to my students, when you meet someone in the streets, they’re not going to tell you, ‘Put this sentence into the past’ or ‘Put this sentence into the negative.’ But they are going to ask you, ‘Where is the library? Where is the town hall?’ You need not just practice but also production. You need to express yourself.”

The Access students were clearly glad to be expressing themselves, even on a Saturday. When the lesson finished, they stayed. They were in no hurry to leave.

Malagasy students are accustomed to lengthy school days. To my astonishment, I learned that classes normally start at 7 a.m. and end at 6 p.m. There is a break of either two or three hours in the middle of the day, during which most students go home. There’s no cafeteria



Niry and her students exchange information in a mingle activity.



A classroom at Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara

or café at Jacques Rabemananjara, but you can buy snacks in front of the school. Those who live far away must stay in the classrooms with food they've brought from home: perhaps a dollop of *ravitoto* (crushed cassava greens), or *mofo* (deep-fried fritter), or a piece of fruit, but certainly a large clump of rice. Rice is fundamental. In the Malagasy language, the verb for "to have lunch meal" translates as "eat rice."

Since no one was in a hurry to start the journey home, we all went to the beach to take photographs. After photos, we walked back along the sandy paths between the

classrooms and the broad-leaved trees to the metal gate at the entrance to the school.

The Access students waved good-bye here and headed up the sandy lane toward the cross street that runs parallel to the beach and heads to the center of Toamasina.

Walking is how most students get to school. There are no school buses. Some may take a motorized *tuk-tuk*; others ride the *pousse-pousse*, a two-wheeled, manpowered rickshaw and the cheapest form of public transport. After dropping off passengers at the school gates, *pousse-pousse* runners like to roll to the end of the road to look at the ocean and have a chat.



A chalet at Lycée Jacques Rabemananjara, where students relax or study on their own during breaks



Josiana (far left) and Niry (far right) join their students after class for a photo session on the beach, with their school in the background.

Niry has noticed some changing attitudes about English. “When I first arrived [in Toamasina] 20 years ago,” she says, “it was not like that. But now many people want to learn English. And there are many private courses here. Maybe that’s why our students are keen on learning English, because they know they have some future in mastering English. Together with mastering computers, they have the future in their hands.”

Many students want to go on to university, but the truth is that if their families need them, they must find work, usually as unskilled laborers, helping in the fields or in a market.

It was a long day for me, too. I had flown to Toamasina in the morning, leaving my hotel at 4 a.m. But I would get a chance to see Niry and Josiana one week later in the capital, Antananarivo, fondly known as Tana.

In May 2019, the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar staged the largest training of English teachers that the country had seen. The “21st-Century English Teaching Skills Symposium” involved nearly 400 teachers from all 22 provinces of the country. There were 35 workshops over a two-day period, on subjects such as incorporating group work; managing large classes; and using board games, music, movement, and simple writing tasks. Niry and Josiana came by car to Tana, a ten-hour

trip. Traveling in a car wasn’t so bad. Some Malagasy English teachers from farther afield started their journeys on foot or by ox cart before hooking up with a *taxi-brousse*, a minivan.

“How was it—the Symposium?” I asked Josiana and Niry in a letter afterward. “Was there anything new or inspiring?”

Josiana answered that “the techniques shared were just amazing. I’m already applying some of them.”

Niry wrote: “I’ve been a teacher trainer for 20 years but I realize that I still need help. There are still many different new ways to teach English that I do not know. Teachers are eternal students.”

This article was written by **Kevin McCaughey**, a Regional English Language Officer (RELO), currently at the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, Serbia. From 2016 to 2019, Kevin worked as RELO in Pretoria, South Africa, advancing teacher development in Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean, including Madagascar. Kevin is fond of using movement and games in the classroom. He has written a book about the use of dice as gaming tools for learning English, and he writes and records his own (often silly) songs.

Photos by Kevin McCaughey