

Under African skies

'Leave your assumptions behind' – a maxim that should be engraved on every classroom door. But it is even more important in sub-Saharan Africa. Teacher and author Jason Anderson is an expert on the challenges of teaching in the region.

Remember last year's ELTons winner *Teaching English in Africa*? Its author Jason Anderson tells the *Gazette* about his experiences.

What were the most meaningful episodes during your ten years working in Africa that contributed to the creation of your book? Which teachers and teacher trainers inspired you the most?

When I first arrived in Eritrea as a teacher educator for VSO over ten years ago, I presumed that I was an expert. I was, but not for the context I now found myself in. The first thing I had to do was to apprentice myself to some of the experienced teachers I was working with, and to learn from them how to teach again. Only then could I work out how my prior experience could be relevant, and then begin, tentatively, to offer advice and input from more Western models of education.

Tesfahanes Negash, a very talented secondary teacher, showed me that more autonomous, student-centred learning was

possible for some groups, but others benefited from a more structured approach, with clear tasks, extensive modelling and detailed feedback. Moving from Eritrea to Rwanda in 2009, I found many shared challenges.

The training programmes by the Bureau National de l'Enseignement Protestant (BNEP) then ran by Francois Rwambonera were a particular inspiration. They involve effective teaching that is also Rwandan in its approach and 'culture'. Teachers relate to it because it is native to them, relevant to their curriculum and challenges, and in line with their beliefs.

In Kenya, I learnt from teachers working in inner-city slums, like Leah Asego, who showed me the importance of discipline as the first vital ingredient of their practice. Working in very large classes, they spend a lot of time training their learners and managing behaviour, while teaching English in the process. They use this to ensure that children who face many challenges outside the classroom are able to focus when inside it.



BEN GREY

Many African countries have made huge strides in education

What are the most challenging contexts for teaching English in Africa?

Through my work for the Unicef Child-friendly Schools project, I have witnessed some very challenging conditions – for example, in primary schools in rural Malawi where classes can have well over 100 students. They often have desks, but they have to take them out just to get the students in, who have to sit on the floor. Classrooms are often dark with poor chalkboards, and they gradually heat up through the day. An hour's teaching in such a classroom can exhaust the most enthusiastic teacher. But it's easy to paint a picture of doom and gloom and to forget the progress made in so many countries across the continent.

Near-universal primary enrolment is happening in many countries, and in some countries (e.g. Botswana) class sizes compare to those in European schools. Incredible achievements in such a short time!

Could you tell us more about your CHILD model and how this applies to English language teaching and learning in Africa?

'CHILD' is a mnemonic for introducing a realistic, learner-centred approach in schools in challenging contexts. It stands for:

Communicate: Children communicate with each other;

Help: Children help each other to learn;

Identify: Children identify with the lesson content

Learn: Children learn at their own speed; Demonstrate: Children demonstrate what they have learnt;

The model was developed not just for English language teaching, but obviously serves well for ELT, inasmuch as it promotes communication and interaction between students.

You mention the particular problem of low literacy levels in the mother tongue among the many challenges teachers face.

As educators and consultants working across Africa know well, some governments are making the dangerous assumption that the earlier they introduce English the better, yet we know from research that students learn faster and retain more if they have a solid foundation in mother tongue literacy before they begin to read and write in English.

Because so many African languages are written phonetically in a Roman alphabet, I have found that a phonics approach to 'additional literacy' in English that builds on (rather than ignoring) their first language literacy, to show the features of English sound-spelling relationships, can reap rewards with the right support. Yet we know so little about introducing phonics in contexts where English is a foreign language, and much more research is needed in this area.

Could you give some advice to teachers

working with the same sort of challenges you faced in Africa?

For ex-pat teachers from higher income countries who go to teach or train teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, my first recommendation is to leave your prior assumptions about what teaching is, and how best to do it, behind.

Begin by trying to understand your new culture, recognise the perceived 'constraints' as part of that culture, and learn from your students and your colleagues – become part of a team, but don't try to lead it. And for teachers who have learnt to teach in African classrooms, a simple piece of advice is to consult your learners more about their learning.

Organising a focus group of students and finding out about their personal challenges that often make it difficult for them to study can often be very insightful. An example of this is a Tanzanian secondary teacher who found out that if she started and finished her afternoon lessons earlier, more female students from distant villages could attend, simply because they were able to get home safely and collect water before it got dark.

Teaching and learning in much of Africa cannot be separated from the challenges of daily life, and this is a key learning point for anyone working in this wonderful continent, where the will and resolve of teachers and learners never cease to amaze me.

JASON ANDERSON CV



Jason Anderson is an education consultant, teacher, teacher trainer and author. He has worked in a wide range of countries across Africa, Europe and Asia for governments, NGOs and development agencies.

He has been involved with teacher training projects for the Unicef Child-friendly Schools Project in Bangladesh, Malawi, Rwanda and Kenya. He has also led the design and writing of materials for various teacher development projects (e.g. UNICEF Malawi in-service primary teacher education, and the British Council Thailand RETC project).

Jason is the author of various ELT books, including: ELTons winner *Teaching English in Africa* (2015, EAEP, Kenya); *Teamwork* (2004, DELTA Publishing, UK); *Trinity CertTESOL Companion* (2017, DELTA Publishing, UK); *Speaking Games* (2014, DELTA Publishing, UK); *Role Plays for Today* (2006, DELTA Publishing, UK).



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You can follow Jason's blog at speakinggames.wordpress.com

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