

Cheikh Amadou Tidiane Niang is in his dream job: he is an English language teacher. His passion for teaching originated in his childhood, when he played school with his cousins. He looked up to his teachers, and they became role models for him. He can name specific English teachers who influenced his decision to continue his studies and paved the way for him to become an English teacher, transforming his childhood dream into reality.



Cheikh Amadou Tidiane Niang shows some of the student-made decorations in a classroom at CEM Gaoudé Boffé school.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Niang studied Applied Linguistics at university. He then worked as a freelance teacher for four years before passing the selective competition for teacher training at the university in Saint-Louis, Senegal. There, he earned his Certificat d'Aptitude à l'Enseignement dans les Collèges d'Enseignement moyen (CAE-CEM), a certificate that allows teachers to teach in public middle schools.

In Senegal, new public-school teachers are assigned to a school by the Ministry of Education. After teaching for three years in the school where they are sent, they can ask to be reassigned. Depending on the location of the schools, they gain points, and when requesting a school from the list of available posts, those with more points will have a better chance of getting selected for their preferred location.

After two years of pre-service training and with his teaching certificate in hand, Mr. Niang received his first assignment, a new middle school, CEM Gaoudé Boffé in northern Senegal. The school is in a remote village more than 400 years old, over 600 kilometers from the capital of Dakar and 138 kilometers from the nearest town. He is the only English teacher at the school and teaches all the middle-school students there both French and English. English is a compulsory subject in Senegal, starting in middle school. He said, "I didn't know if this was an opportunity or a challenge that I must face" in pursuing his dream of being an English teacher.

Mr. Niang grew up in the northeastern part of the country alongside the Senegal River, in an industrial city known for having the only sugar company in the country. He lived with his mother, father, and four siblings. In his hometown, he enjoyed reading and watching documentaries, but he is living in a new world now, and his hobbies have changed. He often spends his free time walking around neighboring villages, discovering the culture and the way of life. He is from the Wolof ethnic group, but his students are Fula and

have a different first language than he does. He is trying to learn the local language and culture, not only to integrate himself in the community, but also to communicate with his students more effectively.

Mr. Niang finds the village interesting due to its cultural diversity and the hospitality of the people there. The Senegalese values of respecting and caring for the elderly are particularly noticeable. He says that everyone lives in harmony under the supervision of the chief of the village, who is highly respected. The village chief is responsible for mediating problems between inhabitants, helping to regulate village life in relationship to the environment, health, and justice, along with helping to organize funding for local events in collaboration with the villagers.

Most people in the area are farmers, growing corn and millet or breeding cattle. The population is mainly composed of the Fula ethnic group, and students come from four neighboring villages to attend the school. Most of them walk to school, and some may arrive by horse. Some come from villages more than three kilometers away each day. This may not seem far, but on foot and in temperatures that can be over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (over 38 degrees Celsius), it can be daunting to travel between villages on sandy paths with sparse vegetation. Almost 300 students between the ages of four and 14 attend the school, in classes from kindergarten to middle school.



Students in traditional dress with instruments sing and welcome visitors to CEM Gaoudé Boffé school.

Mr. Niang realizes that many of the students face the same obstacles he faced in finishing school. In this rural area, education is not widely seen as important. Girls face particular challenges due to gender stereotypes and familial pressure to get married early and start a family. He noticed that many girls quit school and believes the main reason is that their parents do not recognize the importance of school. Mr. Niang understands this because he was the only person in his family to attend school. Formal education was not a priority for his parents, as they did not know the importance of what can be achieved if you complete your education; today, as the main breadwinner in his family, he is considered a role model for the next generation. He is grateful that despite obstacles, he had the opportunity to pursue his studies at university due to his teachers encouraging and supporting him.

One of the most critical challenges Mr. Niang faces in teaching English is a lack of materials, especially since his school is far from Dakar and other main cities, where there is easier access to resources. He has the only printed copy of the English textbook he is using with his students. Besides the lack of books, there is no electricity, and one group of middle-school students doesn't have a classroom yet because the existing rooms are needed for kindergarten and primary-school students. To give these middle-school students a place to study, the community has set up a temporary classroom with walls made from woven reeds.

Another challenge is technology. Mr. Niang feels that “with globalization and modernity, the world is really just one village, and technology is a paramount tool for any English teacher,” and yet “due to lack of training or skills in using technology, along with bad connectivity, teachers rarely implement technology in their teaching practices.” He has little access to technology in his classroom, so he uses his cell phone. He copies materials from his textbook to the blackboard and uses his phone to show flash cards or realia. His phone functions as his book, his video projector, and his speaker, and is his helping hand in teaching.

There is also a lack of training, as many teachers do not have any formal teacher training and are recruited based on their academic diplomas. It was not until 2017 that a teacher-training program was offered to teachers in the northern area of Senegal in Saint-Louis, but training of teachers isn't offered every year there, and it is very competitive to get a place in the program.

Another obstacle for both teachers and students is the standardized test in English that students must take at the end of middle school. While the government promotes the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) and assessment, the standardized testing methods do not match this. The curriculum is too demanding for teachers to cover all the material in the time allotted for English instruction.



Students dressed for a cultural performance with Mr. Niang



Mr. Niang with students in one of the classrooms

There is also a linguistic barrier, as many teachers are posted in areas where they don't speak the local language of that community. An inexperienced teacher may fail to respond to the needs of the students who sometimes use their local language in class or don't have the knowledge to understand the lesson, even if the teacher uses French, the official language in Senegal.

One way Mr. Niang overcomes linguistic barriers in his classroom is by using Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. Some of his favorite activities are drawing, making posters, storytelling, singing, and writing projects. He said, "For me, drawing is fun, creative, and it fosters collaboration between students." These types of activities offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their creative and linguistic abilities.

Mr. Niang currently uses a textbook called *Keep in Touch*, recommended by the Ministry of Education and specifically designed for students in Senegal, but he points out that even this sometimes doesn't fit the local cultural context. For example, his students have never heard of some of the fruits listed in the textbook, as those fruits don't exist in the arid region where the students live. After seeing that *apple* was a vocabulary item in the textbook, he bought apples for his students to try after traveling to a city with a market. Even with the slight mismatch of context to his students' daily life, he feels the national curriculum and the textbook he chose match the needs for CLT and help to provide a base of linguistic functions the students need to communicate.

He is free to teach whatever he wants as long as it can be linked to the national syllabus and the curriculum, so he thinks about what is best for his students. For him, freedom in teaching depends on one's motivation to discover and explore new ideas. He explained, "I have integrated a lot of culture awareness tips in my teaching practice this year because the teaching materials must take into consideration students' culture and the environment where they grow up." Because

of this, he incorporates aspects of the local culture into his classroom teaching and his outside activities with the students.

Mr. Niang is always looking for ways to develop his professional capacity and has found useful resources, such as *Our English Club Resource Book* (Anderson 2021), the American English website (<https://americanenglish.state.gov/>), and *English Teaching Forum* (<https://americanenglish.state.gov/Forum>). The section of *Forum* that he finds most useful is Try This, as it provides new, creative pedagogical approaches, which he adapts based on his students' level and needs.

He also uses his phone data for his own professional development. He tries to participate in the massive open online courses (MOOCs) offered by the Online Professional English Network (OPEN; <https://openenglishcommunity.org/>) and webinars offered by American English and the British Council whenever available, but the lack of internet bandwidth sometimes prevents him from being able to follow the programs and complete them.

Mr. Niang has overcome many teaching challenges thanks to his frequent attendance at the Association of Teachers of English in Senegal (ATES) webinars and workshops. Even without formal training, educators can join local teachers' meetings or attend ATES events. Networking between experienced and less experienced teachers is important, and many are eager to share their teaching knowledge with newer teachers like himself. He is currently the head of the ATES organization committee, helping plan events and activities.

Such activities include gatherings of English clubs, which play a pivotal role in secondary schools throughout Senegal. Each year, ATES hosts an English Club Convention, where top students from each of the country's 14 regions compete in categories like spelling bees, writing competitions, skits, and podcasting. These clubs provide a fun environment for students to develop speaking, negotiation,

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social, and problem-solving skills, along with building confidence. The competitions give students an opportunity to show off their skills and English teachers a chance to discuss new ideas for motivating their students to use English in creative ways.

Because students have only four hours of English each week, Mr. Niang started an English club at his school known as Gaoudé Boffé English Club Kingdom, or GBECK. At first, the students didn’t understand the difference between the English club and regular English classes, so he changed the seating arrangements and made the club activities more fun and less structured. The club chose the motto, “One mission, one ambition, one passion, life is a mission,” with the goal being to spread English to different villages and link English to real-life situations. The club members use English to promote moral values and citizenship, and they distributed a questionnaire to find out where to focus activities in their community.

This led to the launch of a program they called “Girls’ Schooling Matters” to address the challenge of girls dropping out of school early. The students and Mr. Niang went to surrounding villages and talked to people about encouraging girls to get their secondary-school certificate. They began by asking simple questions to female students in the primary schools, such as what they want to do when they leave school; all answered that they wanted to be a housewife. Being a housewife was the highest thing they thought they could achieve. Students discussed this with the teachers and the local people. They met with community leaders to discuss the importance of education and held outdoor activities to get everyone’s attention.

They also talked about success stories of women in Senegal, using models that represented the local context and culture. The students talked to their parents about women who were successful; they also talked with the women who sell food around the school. The club celebrated International Women’s Day by inviting many women from nearby villages who had stayed in school to speak about the importance of education. In this way, Mr. Niang integrated the community into the learning process. He noted, “In the English club, we make sure that women and girls play leading roles, even if they live in a society where men normally lead.” In fact, GBECK’s leader is a female student, and she has taken a prominent role in raising awareness about gender issues in her community.

Mr. Niang believes that involving the community in projects is important and has encouraged GBECK to take on activities such as cleaning up the school and the village, along with the campaign on gender issues and the wider role that women play in the world beyond their achievements in the home. The students are currently working on a program to set up a Community English Club; the plan is for Mr. Niang and the students to teach basic English to villagers.

According to Mr. Niang, “My students are lucky to practice English after class because we often meet every Wednesday afternoon in the English club.” The students sometimes practice English at home while singing or playing and sometimes gather at night in a classmate’s house to play games like “Simon Says” and “Where Am I?” He feels that learning English as a new language is itself a motivation for his students. Also, he believes

that his attitude and flexibility are central to motivating his students: “They are eager to attend the English class because the activities are done in a fun and relaxing environment where I sing, dance, play, praise, and guide whenever necessary.” Setting up an English club has also been a noticeable source of motivation to learn English, offering students the chance to participate in regional and national contests. Students’ parents and the whole community have been involved since the beginning, which has helped students to love the language and engage with it even more. The community is proud that in its first year of existence, the school won first prize in the podcast and talent-show events during GBECK’s participation in the regional ATES English Club Convention.

After months of teaching, Mr. Niang realizes that he is always discovering new things. His students are skillful, and their motivation and drive inspire him and give him determination. He is working on developing materials that will bridge the gap between the students’ culture(s) and the content in the textbook. He calls this “cultural pedagogy,” and he incorporates local artists’ work and traditional daily utensils into an exhibition space in the classroom. This gives students the opportunity to admire and talk about aspects of their culture that are important to them; it also highlights the relevance of their culture, even though it may not appear in the textbook they use.

Overall, Mr. Niang feels he is on the right path as an educator but believes, as do most teachers, that there is still a lot to learn, both from the new community he now lives in and from his students.

REFERENCE

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The road to CEM Gaoudé Boffé school



CEM Gaoudé Boffé school grounds



Photo courtesy of Cheikh Amadou Tidiane Niang

Mr. Niang leads outdoor activities with students.

This article was written by **Dawn Rogier**, the Regional English Language Officer for West Africa based in Dakar, Senegal. Her specialization is in assessment, and her research interests include the socio-cultural implications of textbook design and English as a medium of instruction. She extends her sincere thanks to Cheikh Amadou Tidiane Niang for his help in the preparation of this article.

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