



Haiti's Human Solidarity in Action

by Francois Vilmenay (MATE-TESOL, Haiti)



On January 12, 2010, an earthquake of magnitude 7.0 hit Haiti, leaving up to 250,000 dead, 300,000 injured and 1.5 million homeless. English educator Francois Vilmenay describes how EFL teachers came together to help each other and their country.

I left my office at about 4:15 pm and the earthquake hit the country at 4:55 pm. I was at a major crossroads in Port-au-Prince, the capital, when that happened, and I could see the falling electrical poles and buildings. I also witnessed the splitting of the ground below my feet and people everywhere were screaming. It was horrible.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the whole country was in a shambles. The earthquake has had a negative impact on the educational system in the country: a lot of educators, teachers and school administrators lost their lives and all schools, colleges and universities had to be closed. Some were able to reopen later in April 2010.

I personally witnessed the human solidarity among the teachers of English in the country. We quickly set up a network in the capital and then we tried very hard to reach out to those teachers in the provinces and in the southern part where teachers were badly hit by the earthquake. We were able to communicate using our cell phones and via e-mail.

The English teaching community in Haiti has had to face a lot of challenges and reached out to those teachers who live in the remotest parts of the country. Some teachers traveled long distances to distribute teaching materials to their colleagues and helped them to build temporary shelters to accommodate their students who are really eager to learn English as a foreign language.

Mate-TESOL sincerely thanks Matt Salusbury, *EL Gazette* news editor, for his front page report (June 2010 issue) of our national conference. We also thank all those affiliates that sent books and magazines to Haitian English language teachers. The teachers are determined to continue the daily struggle, doing their job as best they can despite their limited teaching resources. Some teachers have been teaching under temporary shelters in camps. Others have had to teach under trees.

Our teachers here continue to remain optimistic about the future. Indeed, English language teaching and learning in Haiti can – and surely will – be revitalised and restructured as part of the rebuilding process in the psychological and emotional aftermath of the earthquake.

Despite the sorrows, deaths and upheavals caused by the earthquake and by the cholera epidemic which followed, Mate-TESOL was determined to hold its annual national conference in Port-au-Prince in June 2010. This took place as scheduled on the theme *Lessons Learned from EFL Teaching: Challenges and Rewards*. Over 55 teachers took part. It was a huge success.

François Vilmenay teaches EFL at the Haitian-American Institute and ESP at vocational schools in Port-au-Prince. He is a founder of MATE, the Miragoane Association of Teachers of English.

This is reprinted with the author's permission from EL Gazette #375 April 2011 <www.elgazette.com>.

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Many teachers in Haiti are still in desperate need of resources. If you have spare EFL books, send them to:

Herve F. Alcindor, Mate-Tesol President
84 Avenue Jean-Paul II, Turgeau,
Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Interview with François Vilmenay

What was the biggest challenge you faced?

The post-earthquake period, which I call the "post-traumatic period". The earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010 and schools reopened in April. The students were traumatised and couldn't concentrate on anything; the schools experienced a low turnout and class performance was very low. Yet through it all the students fought to succeed. They showed a strong human solidarity.

What's your top tip for teaching?

In class, I use the students' "tales of woe" to create lessons, using earthquakes as contexts for speaking and writing skills. Teachers around the globe also have their own tales to tell. Let us share our experiences, achievements, and our "woe" and prove to the world that we can make a difference.

Source: *Tales of Woe after Haiti Earthquake* (March 8, 2011) <www.guardian.co.uk/education/>