

Originally written for the Harvard Graduate School of Education  
(Excerpt)

## Limited Access

*The U.S. Department of States' English Access Microscholarship Program provides critical language instruction to disadvantaged youth all over the world, but its impact is much larger than its stated objective.*

By Evan Townsend

“Upholding English is my duty. Speaking English is my responsibility.”

Sylviah Katia stands among 20 Kenyan students, resplendent in their graduation gowns, chanting these words in unison from the small stage of an events center in Nairobi, Kenya. In front of them, friends and family look on proudly. Behind them, among the strings of lights and colorful balloons festooning the stage, the banner of the U.S. Embassy peeks through. “Surely,” the students conclude, “English is powerful.”

Sylviah and her classmates rode over three hours from their homes to be at this convocation. These teenagers are among the brightest in Wamunyu, the rural Kenyan village where I taught English. In the ten months we spent together, I learned about the students' ambitions – how they hoped to enter medical school, design litter-collecting robots or build new schools for their community. I also learned about the barriers they faced and the poor quality of the education they received.

“I want to be a politician one day,” Sylviah once told me, “But school here can't teach me enough on how to do the things I need for that.”

Over the course of her academic career, Sylviah has seen student walkouts, corrupt principals and absent teachers. Her school lacks running water, let alone quality textbooks. Sylviah's experience isn't unusual compared to her peers across rural Kenya, though. What makes Sylviah stand out is her intellectual appetite despite those barriers. So, starved for academic challenge, Sylviah was eager to participate in the [English Access Microscholarship Program](#) (Access) when she was offered the chance. Now, two years later, she beams with pride as she accepts her completion diploma from U.S. Ambassador to Kenya Robert Godec.

When the students pile onto the bus after the ceremony, they chatter rapidly, switching between English and Kikamba, their mother tongue. No longer in their graduation gowns, the group sports matching neon green shirts with the word “ACCESS” scrawled across the back in a font resembling a child's handwriting. As they begin the long journey home, Sylviah and her classmates are too abuzz with celebratory excitement to notice as they pass a quiet park along Moi Avenue. Outside the bus windows, a small fountain and a wall of names commemorate the victims of a terrorist attack. These graduates weren't even alive in 1998 when the U.S. embassies

here and in Tanzania were bombed. The organization behind the attack was virtually unheard of at the time, but these teenagers, like their counterparts in America, have grown up hearing whispers of al-Qaeda's name.



*Sylviah (in a red robe and blue sandals) poses with Wamunyu classmates after receiving her Access Diploma. (Patrick Munguti, 2017)*

At the time, the embassy bombings were one of the worst in terrorist attacks in U.S. history and earned Osama bin Laden a place on the FBI's Most Wanted list. The explosion in Nairobi claimed 213 lives, [12 of those American](#). It was a turning point in the strategic relationship between the U.S. and Kenya. The American government began seeing Kenya's proximity to the Middle East and poorly regulated borders as conditions ripe for Islamic radicalization. In response, it placed the country on its [Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program](#) and, with U.S. support, Kenya established its [National Security Intelligence Service](#). While these efforts were vast expansions on previous anti-terrorism efforts, they were nothing compared to the War on Terror which began three years later.

In September 2001 while the U.S. reeled from the attacks on the World Trade Centers, President George W. Bush said in [an address to Congress](#) "The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda. They are some of the murderers indicted for bombing American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya..." Within days, the United States had invaded Afghanistan.

This war, as well as the later War in Iraq, served as the global face of the War on Terror, but they were only one part of the Bush administration's multipronged response following 9/11. In its [National Strategy for Combating Terrorism](#), the Bush administration outlined objectives for suppressing radicalism. To achieve most objectives, such as defeating terrorist organizations and denying the state sponsorship of terrorists, the administration would use military and economic force. One such objective, however, required a different approach – “win the War of Ideas.”

“The United States will seek to support moderate and modern governments, especially in the Muslim world,” the Strategy reads. “We will continue assuring Muslims that American values are not at odds with Islam.”

The U.S. Government could not accomplish this with hard power alone, so it set about using attraction rather than coercion to change the long-term attitudes and preferences of foreign nationals. To do so, the government did not deploy armed forces, but instead the [Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs](#) (ECA).

The ECA was born from the [Fulbright-Hays Act](#), also known as the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961. Under President John F. Kennedy, the act established the bureau to “build friendly, peaceful relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries through academic, cultural, sports, and professional exchanges, as well as public-private partnerships.” The ECA was no novice at operating programs to promote the American image abroad. During the Cold War, its exchange programs were a [key strategy](#) of the U.S. government for mitigating tensions with the Soviet Union. To win the War of Ideas, however, the ECA struck a different approach. Instead of using two-way channels of exchange for scholars, athletes, or artists, it developed a new program which would open direct channels of information to its intended target: the minds of young students.

According to the ECA's [strategic mission](#), “acquisition of English language ability not only makes young men and women more competitive in life, but guarantees them the ability to access materials on America and American values.” Under this guiding philosophy, the Bureau inducted 17 students into its first Access class in Casablanca, Morocco in May 2003. In less than a year, the ECA piloted the program in 43 other countries, each chosen for their “significant Muslim populations.” Among them was Kenya.

By providing funds to approved in-country educational service providers (usually schools or nongovernmental organizations), the ECA would sponsor select students on “microscholarships” to receive additional instruction outside of class. The ECA would target economically disadvantaged but academically high-achieving students between 14 and 18 years old. While the ECA would seek to maximize the participation of Muslim students, it decided not to select students based on religious affiliation. Over the course of two years, these students would participate in five hours of lessons each week as well as two intensive sessions in the summer. For the most part, the ECA didn't offer specific parameters for these lessons.

“Because of the program's multiregional scope, the method of instruction, curriculum, textbooks, tests, hours of instruction, cost per participant, etc., may vary considerably from country to country and sometimes within a single country,” says the [Notice of Funding of Opportunity](#).

No matter the variation program to program, however, the heart of the program remained the same.

“In addition to providing quality instruction in the English language,” read the [ECA grant proposal](#) to expand the pilot, “all courses in which microscholarship students are enrolled are required to have adequate and appropriate content to give the students insights into, and an appreciation for, American culture and values.” The grant proposal for \$8.75 million was approved.

The ECA had brought me to Wamunyu to begin with. Under one of its exchange programs, the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Program, I traveled to Kenya in 2017 to teach students in rural high schools. Before arriving I, like most Americans, had no knowledge of the Access program. The first I'd heard of it was sitting in the U.S. Embassy across from the officer of public affairs as she explained America's strategic missions in Kenya. Aside from promoting economic security and educational development, the [Embassy seeks to counter violent extremism](#). As such, the four of us Americans who had traveled to Kenya on the same grant would be placed within the country to assist with one of more than half a dozen Access programs already in operation. Our job, we were told, was not only to teach English but also to expose the young Kenyans in our classroom to American culture and ways of life.

By the time I met Sylvia she had already completed the first year of Access. Before our lesson on my first Sunday afternoon in Kenya, she greeted me in remarkable English. She told me what she knew about jazz and Thanksgiving, and how she was disappointed she had to miss the service at the local Baptist church with her family. But not too disappointed, she admitted. The pastor's sermons were “long-winded.” (Long-winded! Clearly I had underestimated these students' vocabulary.)

As Sylvia spoke I listened closely, trying to get a clearer picture of what she had been learning in Access. On that first day of lessons, only two days after first hearing about the program, I felt woefully unprepared for the five hours of instruction I was expected to give. The foreign service officer in Nairobi had provided me with no curriculum, only the assurance that my presence alone would be a lesson for the students. This, I would learn, was typical. The only guidance which the Embassy had given the two local teachers who had been providing Access in Wamunyu for the previous years was a sample of a quarterly report with a checklist of the kinds of lessons they were required to give, including American holidays, American history, American popular culture, and American education. It was a checklist they followed closely, they told me. They weren't going to risk losing their funding.

The Access microscholarships not only went to the teachers' hourly pay, but also covered the costs of the books the students could check out and read at home, the internet they had become staggeringly adept at, and the occasional day trips which, for some students, were the first times they ever left Wamunyu. It even paid for the *githiri*, a tasteless corn and bean dish which students would load onto their bowls in heaping piles before the start of class every Sunday. If she eats enough at Access, Sylvia once told me, her parents don't have to feed her dinner.

With the meals, technology, and community Access provided, the students came to rely on it for more than just English education. It had become an integral part of their lives. So, too, had the lessons they learned in it.



*Kenyan Access students and providers prepare for a beach cleanup as part of the program. (Patrick Munguti, 2017)*