

Interview with

# Laila El Baghazaou

Winner of the 2023 African Union  
Continental Best Teacher Award

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Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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### **IICBA:** Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

My name is Laila El Baghazaoui. I am a high school teacher and a PhD student. I received an international school award from the British Council for my work on different projects, connecting my colleagues and my school with other schools around the world. For example, I facilitated a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) for Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into the Exploration of Culture in an English as a Foreign Language setting. I was selected by the Ministry of Education as one of the innovative teachers during the school year 2018-2019. One of my initiatives was the program of Global Nomad Groups for four years. Thanks to this program my students could connect with other students from the United States. They shared their stories, values, and pictures. They learned to stop stereotypes and prejudices and promote mutual understanding. I have also worked on fighting drugs in my school in collaboration with a school from Taiwan within the framework of the iEARN (International Education and Resource Network) organization. I also won an Africa scholarship from IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English) to attend the international conference in UK. Right now, I am a TCLP Arabic teacher at Washington Latin Public School. I have been chosen by the Moroccan Ministry of Education along with the American Council to take part in this program. It is sponsored by the United States Department of State. I have also written three articles (two about teaching and one about cross cultural studies) and I have given different workshops and participated in national and international conferences.

**Background:** Best Teacher Awards recognize outstanding teachers. These awards can raise the appreciation of teachers in society while demonstrating that hard work and innovation by teachers makes a difference. The African Union Commission instituted the Continental Best Teacher Award in 2019. Winners receive cash gifts and are celebrated. The Award is important to celebrate the unique contribution that teachers make to their students, their communities, and societies. The African Union Commission and UNESCO IICBA, the coordinating agency for the Teacher Development Cluster under the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025, encourage countries that have not yet done so to create national (as well as regional and local) teacher awards. This series of interviews shares insights from the winners of the 2023 Continental Best Teacher Award.



**IICBA: What do you teach, at what level, and where?**

I teach English to high school students at Charif Elidrissi High School Benslimane in Morocco. Now I am a TCLP Arabic teacher at Washington Latin PCS for one school year.

**IICBA: For how long have you been a teacher, and what motivated you to become one?**

I have been teaching for about 12 years. One of my motivations to becoming a teacher is the love of making a change in the lives of people, especially young ones who are struggling to find their way. Teachers are supposed to be the light at the end of the tunnel. They are the role models of their students. For this reason, we make them see the future clearly and help them with their choices. We make them believe in their skills. I love to see the rewarding results at the end of the school year with my students. It is because of this fruitful result that I love my job. I feel I am a life changer and not only an educator.

**IICBA: What are you most passionate about in your teaching?**

I am passionate about connecting classroom projects. I love to connect my students with other students around the world. I think that through connecting classroom projects, students start to think globally and act locally. Each time I implement a connecting classroom project, I feel that my students gain new knowledge and start to see the world from a totally different perspective. They like knowing about other students' cultures and way of thinking. It is thanks to these virtual exchanges that

my students start to think critically and believe in their dreams. They see new experiences from other students that motivate them and help them go forward and believe in their personal and educational projects.

**IICBA: What are some of the challenges teachers face today, and what can be done to overcome these challenges?**

Teachers all around the world face many different challenges, however African teachers often contend with a unique set of obstacles that can make their job very hard. Among these challenges, there is a lack of resources like copying machines and video projectors. Students can't afford printing papers outside the school, so teachers use the available resources to do their job. Besides, some teachers are teaching in bad conditions. They may need to travel from an area far away to another to teach students, because there are no available houses for them to live in near the school. They suffer a lot to get to the places where they work. To overcome these challenges, governments should equip classes with video projectors and provide free printing paper for both students and teachers. Furthermore, they need to build employer-provided housing for teachers to improve their living conditions.

**IICBA: What are some of the opportunities that teachers could seize and what could be done to empower them to do so?**

There are many opportunities that teachers could seize. For instance, they could take part in national and international organizations that provide in-service training like IATEFL I mentioned earlier or TESOL (International



Association, formerly Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages). Teachers should update their knowledge through taking part in different workshops and conferences. They can take part in connecting classroom projects which can be found in the iEARN organization platform and Global Nomad Group platform. Also, they can take part in MOOCs. This provides professional development opportunities for teachers with different specialties. The courses can be self-paced or taken over a limited time.

***IICBA: You have been recognized as an outstanding teacher. What practical advice do you have for other teachers?***

The advice that I could give to teachers is 'determination is the key to success.' Teachers need to be determined if they start any project. When I begin any project, I just can't stop. It is true that we struggle sometimes, but we go forward to the end. I also advise teachers to fall in love with their ideas and dreams. No one will believe in your



project if you don't believe in it yourself. Give value to your materials and your ideas, be determined, and love what you are doing

**IICBA: Looking back, if there is something you could do differently in your career as a teacher, what would that be?**

There is nothing that could be done differently because we learn from our mistakes. I used to give much importance to examinations. Right now, I focus on the process of learning and not on grades. Sometimes, I use projects as a way of assessment instead of a written exam to motivate my students. This is the one thing that I could have done differently in the past. I used to focus on examinations and grades more than the process of learning because the students are haunted by exams at the end of the school year. Recently, I started to convince my students to focus on the process of learning because it will help them with their examinations more than concentrating on the examination itself.

**IICBA: What does being recognized for the Award mean to you? Do you plan to use this recognition to further promote quality education?**

Being recognized for the Award means 'the hard work pays off'. This revives my intrinsic motivation to do my best in my classroom and in my school. It helps me move forward and make a change in my students' lives as well as in my community. Recently, I moved to Washington Latin Public School to teach Arabic for one school year. I could not adjust to the new culture. I was about to quit the program, but when I received the news about the Award I withdrew my decision and started a new beginning with a very optimistic view. The Continental Best Teacher Award means a lot to me.

**IICBA: Do you plan to use this recognition to further promote quality education?**

I plan to buy video projectors and computers for English language classes to facilitate the process of learning and teaching the English language in my school, especially as we have about 1,500 students in our school. I will provide English books for students who need financial support. They will need to bring them back at the end of the school year for other students to benefit from the books.

**IICBA: Finally, could you please share a personal anecdote about yourself?**

I love hiking and climbing mountains. I started this hobby in 2018. In the beginning, I didn't know if I could make it to the summit. I just wanted to enjoy the journey and stop when I feel tired. I figured out that I could reach my goal with determination and some patience. It is true that I could be slow in climbing. However, I have never given up. I could always reach the summit whatever it took me. I started with the 2nd highest summit in Africa, Toubkal. But I have never told my mother about my journeys because she is always against climbing mountains!

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