Note from *people and places*: this volunteer's placement was designed specifically for them – they went through our full matching process, as we've been doing with you. The placement report indicates their particular skills and experience – yours may be similar or completely different – your own placement will make best use of **your** experience and skills. Every volunteer is different – in what they give and what they gain. Reports from previous volunteers serve to give you as good a picture as possible about the project. If you have any questions about any of the detail in this report please do not hesitate to contact me at dianne@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

E-volunteering placement report Maggie Powell
Morocco: Dar Asni 2. November 2020 to March 2021

What was your motivation for e-volunteering?

 We regularly receive the People and Places Newsletter and when we read reports of various ways in which people were volunteering online, we thought that we might be able to do something. I say 'we' because my husband and I have done volunteering in the past and we had never given up on the idea of doing something similar again. We had had a few health issues which prevented us returning to Port Elizabeth but online teaching seemed a great opportunity. We looked carefully at the various projects and decided that the possibility of helping girls in Morocco with

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their English would really suit us as we have both taught languages throughout our careers and we are both fluent in French which, we thought, might be an advantage.

We duly got in touch with Dianne to discuss the possibility and she was keen to get us involved in the first instance as 'guinea' pigs' for online teaching.

Pre placement preparation

People and Places are very diligent about doing background checks and making sure that people are matched to projects. As we have volunteered with them before, much of the preparatory work had already been done. We had already written about our careers and life experiences and they had taken up our references, two each, so those things were in place. Police DBS checks have to be renewed every year but fortunately I already had one as I had been doing volunteering in a local primary school. Dianne got in touch first of all and told us all about the situation in Asni and about the work of the charity EFA (Education for All) Morocco. She then set up a zoom meeting to introduce us to Karima the EFA representative who would be our contact throughout the placement. At the same time she also set up an informal meeting with the housemothers in Asni. There are three boarding houses in Asni where the girls are able to lodge under the care of a housemother, while they attend the local lycée and study for their baccalauréat. Covid has meant that the girls have had to be divided into two groups which have had to alternate between school and their home village, one week at school and one week at home. Dianne also set up monthly zoom meetings for online volunteers to enable us to discuss all aspects of our teaching and also ways of improving the set-up. All volunteers were asked to agree to a twelve week commitment and were given the option of doing one or more hours a week.

What did we do well?

Apart from this, we were able to be in contact with Dianne and each other on a very regular basis so in practice, we did not have to wait for the month to pass before sorting out any problems that arose.

• What could we do better?

The major problem initially was that there were too many girls in each 'class'. This was linked to the fact that online communication is much slower than actual classroom interaction and there is not as much opportunity for whole class participation and chorus responses. Added to this was the unstable nature of the Jitsi.meet link or maybe just the internet in Asni, which often meant that girls ended up on one computer rather than several. In any case there is always a risk of feedback when two or three computers are in close proximity on the same link. To circumnavigate this problem, we agreed to halve the class size from six to three to allow each girl more time to practise her language skills. So that they did not miss

out, my husband and I decided to do two hours a week so that we would actually see the same number of girls but in different classes. Writing a manual on how to use Jitsi with screen shots, helped the girls to become more adept at managing blips online. However, my own opinion is that Zoom is more stable and more versatile and I did resort to setting up Zoom meetings on occasions and certainly during the last week. I would advise that any new girls working with volunteers should have a copy of the manual nearby. It is very difficult to explain how to use the 'chat' facility when you have no sound. It is much better for them to know all about the symbols at the bottom of the screen before they start.

Your experience and work

I think the girls are exceptional. They have already learnt three languages - Berber, Arabic and French before they even start on English at around the age of fifteen. They are very hardworking and extremely keen to learn all they can. The fact that we could speak French did help on the relatively few occasions when there was obviously interference from the French language. It also helped initially with contact with the housemother who at that stage, was much more conversant with French than with English though this is changing.

I decided that I would write up lesson notes in the form of a worksheet for the girls after each lesson and I also included simple, consolidating exercises to reinforce what we had learnt together. They seemed to appreciate playing a very active and reactive speaking role in lessons with loads of repetition when necessary. They understood the need for good pronunciation. Role plays helped too. I do not think they have this kind of opportunity in their normal classes.

In your opinion, are there any significant changes needed in the information we sent to you during your preparation for this placement?

The profiles which we received prior to our placement should have been helpful for deciding on the level and fluency of the girls but this was not the case. They were well written and indicated a good level of language skills. However, this was not borne out when we actually met the girls and assessed their fluency for ourselves. They are perfectly capable of learning their profiles by rote without even being able to pronounce words such as 'engineer' or 'psychologist' correctly. I would say that it is useful to have profiles but they should come with a caveat that they do not represent the actual linguistic skills of the girls. The other problem was that the profiles and initial timetables we received did not always match up with the girls we met so initially time was spent getting to know the new girls. This is, of course, a repetitive exercise and though quite useful could be boring for girls who had done it several times before. So up to date and accurate profiles would be good. AS soon as I received them, I had planned a series of relatively advanced lessons based on the

profiles with built in progression in the level of language required. I had to abandon these immediately as unrealistic and start all over again. (Note from pandp : we initially believed it would be a good idea to provide these backgrounds which are prepared by the girls with support from English speaking volunteers – which are then placed on a notice board in their home – however we have stopped doing this now – as Maggie rightly observes the ey mislead in terms of the girls spoken English abilities – and also – due to the ever changing school time tabling{which neither we nor Education for All have any control over} we are unable to guarantee that every girl will attend the English lessons)

Also with the problems posed by Covid as an added complication, it soon became clear that we would not be able to guarantee having the same girls every fortnight. It was at that point I decided to adopt a topic based approach. I began with

1classroom etiquette, teaching the girls how to phrase questions and requests in different and often more polite ways.

2 talking about Asni in general. Essential questions - Where, When, Why, What, How (how long, how far how much) Focus on answering questions. Using the gerund - I like reading etc

3 introducing them to Stratford upon Avon and showing a short video to take them outside the classroom. Reinforcement of the forms 'would, could and should'. Focus on asking questions and also on the use of to and in with place. A brief introduction to William Shakespeare. Talking about what foods we like eating

4 Focus on How long have you been? together with for, since - something which speakers of other languages find difficult. Focus on question forms with do you? and the tag answers Yes I do, No I don't

5Showing a visitor around Dar Asni 2 using Dianne's photos which are a great resource. Karima had told us that the girls are often asked to show English speaking visitors around their lodging house so they were really surprised to see the photos and responded well to the exercise.

6Talking about daily routine both one's own and other people's. The 's' on the third person singular of verbs kept catching them out! I managed to find another short video about Fred's daily routine which they enjoyed and watched several times. I think they found it useful to copy Fred's accent. It also gave them a glimpse into the everyday school life of a seventeen year old. We added in adverbs such as often, usually, sometimes, rarely, never etc to add variety.

7 When lessons went particularly well and the girls understood quite quickly, we would have free conversation in the last fifteen minutes and these could take us way off piste e.g discussion of the caste system in India!

8 Surprisingly I discovered that they never used the 12 hour clock and had never learnt how to. So we learned that together as Fred (of video fame) used it all the time. Along the way we also learned phrasal verbs ! ! your recommendations for the input of future e-volunteers – a particular area of your work which could be continued by others and how would you suggest this could be done? Towards the end of the placement, we began learning how to express the future in English but this is something they really need to revise and build upon. I did find quite an amusing little video which showed them more natural ways of expressing the future than the ubiquitous 'will' but I think it was a bit too difficult for them and I regret not having more time to spend on it.

Did you have any technical difficulties? – if so what and were you able to solve them?

 We had quite a few technical difficulties especially at the beginning.

1 The internet was unstable and it would take several attempts of leaving and rejoining the lesson before we achieved a more or less secure link .

 2 The girls did not know how to use Jitsi and were not conversant with the symbols at the beginning so were not able, at first , to benefit from the 'chat' symbol which would have allowed us to communicate even when we had no sound. However, using a small whiteboard which I borrowed from my granddaughter was invaluable both in this situation and in the quick communication of vocabulary and structures.

3On occasions the girls had to move from one computer to another. It was evident that some computers were better than others.

 4 We found that headsets with the speaker facility helped early on when we had several girls at the computer, some of whom could not be seen. These were not necessary once we limited the numbers to three.

 5 Occasionally the screen would freeze or we would lose the video altogether. Switching the video symbol on and off several times sometimes improved the situation. There are three dots on the bottom of the screen with various options. By choosing to reduce the quality of the video link, it was sometimes possible to continue albeit with a lower quality.

 6Sometimes we just had to abandon the lesson (only ever after 30 =- 40 minutes of trying) and rearrange for a different time. This we were able to do because we were in lockdown. In the early stages I could have been ready to do a lesson at nine and not actually give it until 11 or even 1.

 7 As mentioned before I think that Zoom is more reliable than Jitsi. Jitsi does allow you to show YouTube videos or your own which is a plus but then so does Zoom and Zoom also allows you to share your screen. .(Note from pandp: whilst there will always

What was the highlight of your volunteer experience?

The girls obviously loved to sing so I decided that in our last lesson we would attempt to sing together. I sent them the lyrics and the tunes of their favourite songs (and of Aicha's) and also those of 'You've got a friend' sung by James Taylor. We also made a little video of our home and invited them in since they had been so kind as to show us around theirs. Bob and I taught together in the final week and probably the highlight for us was holding the final two evening meetings (the internet had let us down during the day) and hearing all the girls (not just the ones in our classes) singing together. It was wonderful and very emotional. They had even made two cakes for our final 'party' one with Bob written on it and one with Maggie. We were really touched even though sadly we couldn't have a piece of cake!!!!!!!!

Would you recommend e-volunteering to other people or not? please tell us why.

I would certainly recommend e volunteering as it is an extremely positive experience. It allows you to make new friends and gives you a better understanding of other cultures. It is also a privilege to be allowed to share really meaningful times with both the girls and the housemother. There is something curiously intimate about these online links which allow you to be in a room in Asni with the girls and which allows them to come into your home. It is very different from a classroom situation. There was a definite sense of being part of their family as they were part of ours. For us, teaching again was a real plus during lockdown and gave us so much to think about other than Covid 19. It gave a structure to our days and a sense of achievement as the girls progressed. We also had so much fun and our home filled with laughter when the girls were online.