

STUDENT ENGLISH CONVERSATION GROUP

INTRODUCTION.

Our project with the Collège Eugène Delacroix is a legacy from the visit of 56 members (aged between 12 and 18) of the Australian Girls Choir, to St Amant de Boixe, as part of their international tour, which included Paris, Barcelona and Singapore.

Some 30 families were needed to provide accommodation for the girls over a three-night period. A number of English families agreed to work with me and the College accepted my request to approach the parents to act as 'host families' for the girls. There was a magnificent response from the College and their parents provided some two thirds of the required host families.

At that time Jessica Labrousse and I discussed the possibility of putting together a group of English friends to attend the college, on a regular basis, chatting with the students and helping them develop their confidence in actually using the language they are learning.

I received a positive response from a number of English friends, all of whom had retired to France and, initially, I was able to recruit a small number of enthusiastic people from St Amant de Boixe, Bayers, Montingnac, Vadalle and Vars to join my wife and me in our project.

RECRUITMENT.

Finding enough participants is an on-going challenge! Born in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s today's UK pensioners are a privileged generation. We have always known full employment and have secured relatively good pension income through our saving and our planning for retirement. We have the opportunity to travel and, in these times of affordable international travel, particularly with the arrival 'budget airlines', the world is my oyster! (*Le monde m'appartient !*).

So, for a number of reasons e.g. planned travel, unplanned travel (family reasons), illness, emergencies etc., to provide the optimum number of participants (eight to ten) for each weekly classroom session I require up to 30 'volunteers' and, at this time, I have 26 people who regularly make themselves available.

Volunteers are identified through advertising, in such social media as 'Facebook', through 'English Associations', within, say, a 50km radius of St Amant and through an English monthly 'journal', 'Connexion'. However, the greatest source of 'volunteers' is through talking to people and telling them of this unique opportunity to 'give something back' to the country and the community that have made us so welcome here.

ADMINISTRATION.

Time consuming, frustrating, enjoyable and rewarding!

To ensure the optimum number of participants, for each weekly classroom session, there is a need to organise, liaise, encourage and constantly communicate with participants. It is necessary to maintain comprehensive records of participant's personal details, and their stated availability, and essential to maintain regular email and voice communication with Group members. There can be, and often are, last minute changes due to the reasons mentioned earlier which have to be accommodated.

STUDENT ENGLISH CONVERSATION GROUP (cont./)

WHY DO WE DO IT!

I have asked the question, *'Why are you happy to give up your free time?'* of a number of our regular participants and here is a selection of their responses:

"It offers the perfect opportunity to take a peek inside the French education world and just maybe make a contribution".

"It is very much a two-way street with us providing some novel 'Englishness' to the children and they, in turn, responding enthusiastically (well most of them!) and, perhaps, some will remember fondly 'those English folk' who came to their school and spent real time with them".

"These children in particular are blessed by marvellously enthusiastic teachers in Jessica, Fabienne and Barbara".

"I just wanted to be of some use to the area, if at all possible".

"Acceptance that our (British expats) presence in France has benefits. Helping out in this way makes me feel that I'm part of the community, something I long to achieve".

"An opportunity to 'put something back' into a community that has accepted us, as foreigners, and made us so welcome"

"It is a pleasure to work with students who show a real interest in interacting with us and demonstrate a high level of enthusiasm and appreciation of our attendance".

"I enjoy the fact that our activities are constantly under review, by both the Group members and College teaching staff, to ensure continuing improvement of our contribution"

"I like that the Teachers regularly remind us just how much they, and the students, enjoy and appreciate the time that we devote to these sessions with them".

I do not think of 'giving up' my time with these young people. It is definitely a 'giving to', of whatever small knowledge I have.

David Williams
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