

KARIMA MEZOUARI

In the High Atlas region of Souss-Massa in Taroudant province in the south of Morocco lies the modest rural commune of Askaoun. Karima Mezouari travels there weekly to provide English language instruction to middle-school students. Making the commute is no ordinary feat: the journey begins in the city of Agadir, and it takes three “grand taxis,” approximately 160 miles (257 kilometers) of travel, and anywhere from five to ten hours for Ms. Mezouari to reach Askaoun.



Karima Mezouari prepares a lesson for her middle-school students.



Students raise their hands, eager to answer Ms. Mezouari's questions.

Ms. Mezouari usually spends Mondays and Tuesdays in Agadir, where she is enrolled in a master's program of applied linguistics and language studies at Université Ibnou Zohr. Wednesdays are allocated for travel; she makes her way from Agadir to Inezgane, from Inezgane to Aoulouz, and from Aoulouz to Askaoun. The last leg of her trip is the most treacherous of the three. The village of Askaoun is accessible via a narrow, curvy dirt road, but the ride, while slow-paced and tiring, offers breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and their hidden settlements. On Thursdays and Fridays, Ms. Mezouari meets the same four groups of students for 50-minute lessons. After two days of teaching, she takes all day Saturday to return to Agadir so that she can prepare for her graduate classes.

Ms. Mezouari started contemplating becoming a teacher when she was a student in high school in her hometown of Aoulouz. There she met Mr. Hassan Bourro, her English teacher and idol, who inspired her with his unique teaching approach, which was different from what she was used to. "He cared about us a lot," she said. "He encouraged us to read, and because one of his passions was

travelling, he would share a lot of personal experiences with us, his students. He was easy to relate to, and I just wanted to be like him."

In order to pursue her teaching career, she completed her bachelor's studies, majoring in English literature. She also took and passed a rigorous entrance exam at the Centre Pédagogique Régional in Marrakech, where, after attending classes for one year, Ms. Mezouari obtained a teaching license in 2011. The Ministry of Education subsequently assigned her a teaching position in the village of Askaoun. In Morocco, teachers who are just starting out can choose a region and province they would like to be considered for, but they might have no say about which city, town, village, or school they will work in. After fulfilling their first two-year contract, they may request a different place to teach, but the Ministry of Education might not grant their request. Since earning her teaching credential, Ms. Mezouari has been both working and studying. In the future, she plans to continue teaching and possibly earn a doctoral degree.

When she first arrived at the middle school in Askaoun, Ms. Mezouari was undeterred by

the circumstances she encountered and was determined to help her protégés succeed. With few resources available, she reached out to the Moroccan Resource Centers of English Network and was supplied with dictionaries and multiple graded readers that she uses in a unique way. “At the end of each unit, I put students in groups of five,” she said. “Together they select five new words they have learned in that unit. We then walk over to our school library, where students look for the words in the graded readers, and they write down sentences where they found those words.” Using dictionaries, students then figure out what the sentences mean and explain them to their classmates. Ms. Mezouari said students “love the fact that even though they cannot read the whole graded readers—this is their first year of being exposed to English—they are able to read at a sentence and paragraph level, and it empowers them greatly.”

Students in the middle school are enthusiastic about learning English. They recognize that education will equip them with knowledge and expand their horizons; that, in turn, will provide them with a higher quality of life. “I never have to deal with discipline problems or misbehavior, though some of my peers who work in city schools do,” Ms. Mezouari said. “I think it is like that because my students have not yet been spoiled by the allure that cities tend to offer. They also hold their teachers and the work they do in high regard.”

Ms. Mezouari’s pupils are in their teens and in the third and final year of middle school, which is when the English language is introduced to learners in Morocco—and its instruction continues throughout high school. Students meet only twice a week to study English with Ms. Mezouari, but it is easy to see how much respect they have for her. They politely raise their hands if they want to answer questions. They wait patiently for their turn to speak and write on the chalkboard. They copy words, sentences, and short paragraphs into their notebooks with precision. Because they have no textbooks—which are too expensive for students to

purchase—their notebooks are the only resource they get to take home with them.

To make her lessons appealing, Ms. Mezouari has decorated the light purple walls of her classroom with pictures of jobs, fruits, vegetables, and clothing. She also regularly asks her students to bring realia for more hands-on practice. Her pupils are happy to oblige because they are eager to learn and excited to see what Ms. Mezouari has prepared for them; she makes up for the lack of technology in her classroom with her diligence and creativity. “One time students were studying ‘What’s this?’” she said. “A student kept saying, ‘Who’s that?’ when the focus was on items and not people. It seemed that he was really fossilized, and I wanted to help him understand the difference between *who* and *what*, so I asked all the students to bring in a picture of a famous person they admired. The following week we looked at images of soccer and tennis players, singers, and actors. In pairs, students practiced ‘Who’s that?’ After class the same student came to see me and told me he realized that I did the exercise for him, and he was really appreciative of that.”

For Ms. Mezouari, the road to learning English has been full of interesting twists and turns. She started by watching movies in English and reading their subtitles in Arabic, learning basic vocabulary and grammar. Her favorite used to be *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which she stayed up until after midnight watching. She also listened to music and learned by heart lyrics of the British band Coldplay. And even though her teachers encouraged her to read, she had never been keen on reading extensively until she became a university student and made up her mind to be the most effective teaching professional she could be.

Ms. Mezouari ensures that her classes go smoothly through preparation and planning. She consults previous school record books, which contain information about students’ attendance, the official curriculum, and



The village of Askaoun with the Atlas Mountains in the background

comments about lessons on similar topics from the past; these also serve as teachers' reflections on how well classes went, which activities might be worth repeating, and which ones should be omitted or changed. Ms. Mezouari then creates a brand-new lesson plan specifically for her students. She looks up the pronunciation of words she is not certain of; assembles flashcards, pictures, or maps; and makes copies of suitable materials. Just before the class, she writes the most important vocabulary and sentences on the chalkboard. Often she supplements her sessions with songs, games, and short presentations because she believes that to engage all types of learners, classroom activities should appeal to a variety of senses. She acquires new ideas from conferences, workshops, and her peers in the master's degree program.

Creating positive emotional contexts and cultivating good relationships with students are essential tools that enhance Ms. Mezouari's classes. Students are encouraged to participate in carefully designed learner-centered activities and to use English at all times. There is no shortage of humor, and everyone is welcome to share personal insights and experiences. Students benefit from one another's contributions and appear

to value highly their opportunity to get an education. They work hard and seem focused on their goals, which can prove difficult to achieve in a school with no source of heat in freezing winter temperatures. Their self-motivation, so rare in some educational institutions, is unmistakable and admirable at this unassuming middle school hidden in a secluded mountain range.

Students in Askaoun may not have smartphones, tablets, and computers. But they have one another, and they have dreams of better things to come. And, above all, they have in Ms. Mezouari a devoted and brave teacher who understands their needs, cares about them deeply, and stands behind them no matter what.

This article was written by **Renata Bobakova**, an English as a second language teaching professional, teacher trainer, and conference presenter who served as an English Language Fellow at Université Ibnou Zohr in Agadir, Morocco, 2015–2016.

Photos by Renata Bobakova

ADIL AZHAR

Every Monday from 9:00 a.m. until noon, Professor Adil Azhar teaches 27 future English teachers a class in Information and Communication Technology at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Rabat, Morocco. When preparing for class, Dr. Azhar starts with his general objectives before getting more specific. “I look at the type of materials that I will need, and I plan the activities accordingly,” he said. “I like to do things a little at a time, and I prefer to think about it a little each day before I finalize it, and it’s never really finalized.”



Adil Azhar explains a group activity to students in his Information and Communication Technology for TEFL course.

Dr. Azhar is a recent addition to the English Section in the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures at ENS. He grew up in Settat, about 85 miles (137 kilometers) southeast of Rabat. After completing his bachelor's degree in English Studies at Chouaib Doukkali University in El Jadida, he moved to Rabat to complete his master's in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at Mohammed V University, where he has also earned a doctorate in Intercultural Communication.

His first teaching experience came as a master's student in 2004, when Dr. Azhar and five classmates in his teaching methods course developed month-long intensive English summer courses in Rabat. They advertised, managed, and taught multi-skill courses. "We thought of the idea as a way to put the two years of theory we had been exposed to into some real practice," he said. "We developed a placement test and a multilevel program; we also ran a small advertising campaign. We repeated that program the following three summers."

The team of six teachers taught mainly beginner to upper-intermediate young adults and university students. While the students learned English, the teaching team learned how to teach. Dr. Azhar remembers the experience as fundamental to his future as a teacher, saying, "I was really nervous and a shy person, but I just decided that I was going to jump in, and what happens, happens. What I learned most was how to prepare lessons and make Plan A through Plan E for class. With time, and trial and error, I managed to learn how to teach."

Dr. Azhar taught his first class at ENS as a faculty member in the spring of 2015. For him, this course, Values in Education, represented a special challenge as it was only his second time teaching a content course. Dr. Azhar focused on the practical: helping teacher trainees manage discipline problems that they encountered while completing their student teaching. He said, "Students had to analyze discipline problems from real situations and try to come up with solutions within the framework of values education, character education, and

education for citizenship. This was a special course because I myself did not know much about values in education, so I had to do my own readings, and I learned a lot. One of the most successful aspects of the course was that I worked with a negotiated syllabus approach, and I brought a number of topics to the class, and the negotiation took place the whole semester. It was kind of an interactive syllabus that changed throughout the semester." By using an approach that values his students' needs and accommodates different learning styles, Dr. Azhar works hard to ensure that all of his learners feel included.

In addition to training English teachers, Dr. Azhar teaches three writing courses (in paragraph writing, composition, and advanced writing). Teaching writing can be challenging, especially when each group has over 40 students. Yet Dr. Azhar loves teaching writing. "I find that it's the most difficult skill when learning a foreign language," he said. "As a student, I had a lot of frustration with writing, so it makes it interesting to teach. Now I'm experimenting with new techniques. I am trying to combine different methodologies, include new technologies, while doing research and assessing the students, their motivations, their perception of difficulty." He hopes that his research on students' perception of self-efficacy and motivation in writing courses will help create better teaching methods for writing courses.

Dr. Azhar is committed to helping the next generation of Moroccans learn and teach English, which has gained popularity over other foreign languages. He explained, "When you think about education policy in general, people are conscious of the importance of English. Now it's everywhere, and you can find all the English teaching materials that you need, and this reflects how much English has gained ground in Morocco." Just a few years ago, it was hard to find a newspaper in English. Now, however, high school students can take their high school exit exam in English. Many science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields are pushing students to study content courses in English in such numbers that universities are creating English departments to meet the

demand. Dr. Azhar has worked in private schools and has seen the demand for English firsthand. He said, “Even if parents don’t speak English, it’s the first language they want their children to learn aside from French. In terms of volume, people are more and more interested in English.”

With the advent of the Internet, prospective English students have access to English, which can help them. “When I was in high school, around 1997, there was very little access to Internet,” Dr. Azhar said. “Even though my classmates and I were very motivated to learn English, there was a scarcity of materials. Now, it’s the opposite. You can learn a lot of things on your own. Students can gain exposure to all the materials they need.”

Like many Moroccan English speakers, Dr. Azhar took his first English class as a high school freshman. He used to go through his brother’s book of English song lyrics, wondering what they meant. As a sophomore, Dr. Azhar entered an English pilot program, where he was deeply influenced by his English teacher. “I remember that when someone said an interesting word, he would become very enthusiastic, and he managed to pass that feeling to us,” Dr. Azhar said. “I would look up new words in the dictionary and try to use them in class because we were very encouraged to bring something new. He influenced my teaching a lot. This notion of enthusiasm, when you show it to your students, you motivate them.” In all his classes, Dr. Azhar focuses on how best to foster student motivation. Depending on the utility of the topic, students can be motivated and active in class. “Motivation itself is not something static, though,” he said. “It keeps moving; it depends on the time of day, the type of activity students are involved in, the teacher, the classroom context, so many things.”

As he prepares a new generation of teachers, Dr. Azhar has had the opportunity to pass along his enthusiasm. As the ENS teacher trainees prepared for a month of practice teaching, one student asked, “What if I have to teach criminals?” Dr. Azhar encouraged it, saying, “Well, then teach criminals. You’ll learn something from any group you teach. I actually taught in a prison once, in fact. It dissipated a number of stereotypes and



The quad area where students often gather for lunch and during breaks between classes

prejudices that I had. Those people want to learn, too.” The best experience for future English teachers, according to Dr. Azhar, is to teach diverse groups of learners. It forces teachers to become active problem solvers.

Over the course of his career, Dr. Azhar has taught English in many contexts in both private and public sectors. He has also served as an adjunct instructor in STEM departments and has taught learners from the age of ten to adults over 60 years old. Having to adapt to different contexts and learner populations has made him sensitive to students’ needs. The English Section at ENS makes teacher trainees’ needs a priority and has recently revised next year’s program so that student teachers have two semesters of student teaching instead of only one. The change comes because students “don’t have enough time to practice teaching and get enough quality feedback,” Dr. Azhar explained.

He hopes that he is able to transmit his love of English to his teacher trainees and that the student teachers will one day transmit their own love of Morocco’s most popular foreign language to their students. “What is motivating for me in my career as a teacher is when I see a smile on the faces of my students showing that they have done something and that they are very proud of it,” Dr. Azhar said. “That’s the most important moment in my teaching, actually.”

This article was written by **Sarah Bedrouni**, a 2015–2016 English Language Fellow in Rabat, Morocco. Prior to becoming a Fellow, she taught English in France, Tunisia, and Morocco. She holds a master’s degree in Linguistics from San Diego State University.

Photos by Sarah Bedrouni