

IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

Living, Learning and Teaching in France

By Margaret Ubels (HOD Languages, St Peter's College, Auckland)

I am writing this in Vichy, in my room on the 2nd floor of a 19th century town house. I have just made uncooked chocolate fudge cake with the youngest daughter of my homestay family and tomorrow I leave after a two week internet course at CAVILAM, the languages and languages pedagogy unit of the Clermont Ferrand university. I am one of 380 teachers of French from all over the world (the only Pacific Region representative here) doing two week ateliers or a one week parcours, plus 500+ young people learning French or other languages.

It is a novelty to be back in class with people more approaching my own age. At the CLA (Centre de Linguistiques Appliquées) in Besançon, my peers were mostly in their early 20s. Everyone kept politely referring to this person as Madame and using the vous form and I looked around to find out who they were talking to and then realised that it was me. I soon put a stop to that.

So let's take a 10 month flashback in time. After some difficulty with my visa, I arrived here in early October. I was met at the airport by the AFS representative. Actually, it took me a while to find her. She had an orange teeshirt with AFS boldly written on the front – but I don't usually read women's chests. She put me on the TGV to Besançon and I valiantly struggled to stay awake for another 3 hours. I didn't dare sleep – I didn't want to miss my stop.

I was met in Besançon by Françoise Javrin, a tiny little dynamo who is the directrice of the primary school. She took me home to have a meal, something she has done regularly since then. The main Directeur, M. Duboval, dropped in to meet me and then later took me to what would be my home for the next year. And that was when I started to realise that the information AFS had given me was not quite what was going to happen. No homestay family but straight into a flat, a spacious, rather utilitarian, one bedroom flat that, now the shutters in the lounge have been fixed, is even quite pleasant. Great for one person, but not for a family. The flat is attached to the primary school and is within walking distance to a supermarket – picture me walking with a granny caddy.

I went into the CLA on the Friday and did the placement exam – it is useless deciding on what courses you are going to do until you have done that. Then I set about arranging my timetable and making the available courses fit with the schools' timetables. Schools plural! There are four schools that are in the Lycée St Jean network: The Ecole Notre Dame, the Collège Notre Dame - both on the one site - with the Ecole St Bernard (they didn't use me) and the Lycée St Jean on another site a bus ride or 25 minutes walk away.



Forget 5 hours per week – I did 17/18 hours. In the first half of the year I worked mostly with the college with 3 periods as a teacher in the primary and in the second half I worked mostly with the Lycée.

I was perturbed at first because this was so dramatically different from what is in the AFS information and I felt that I didn't come all this way to speak English all day BUT it has to be said that it was the best outcome. Working in a place helps integrate you into the local life; I had colleagues, the kids got to know me and I certainly did not spend all my time speaking English to them. Instructions, explanations and just general chit chat had to be given in French. Because I was working like this I really came to feel that I belonged here.

This meant however that I could not do a full diploma programme at the CLA. There were just not enough hours in a day. So I could pick and choose the courses I felt would be most appropriate, choosing the ones with the highest language content rather than the teacher trainee ones. These included the writing and oral courses (excellent first semester but less good in the second – due to a poor and/or lazy lecturer), Oralité (academic analysis of French as it is really spoken) Gestion des Entreprises, and Français des Affaires. I would really have liked to do the ones on modern French civilisation, francophone literature and informatique but my school timetable didn't allow it.

Because I wasn't doing an official diploma I decided to do the DALF C1 qualification followed by the C2 examination in semester 2. These exams are based on the common European standards. The DELF covers levels A1, A2, B1 and B2. The DALF covers C1 and 2. The C2 is considered reasonably demanding hence my inviting all my colleagues around for champagne when I passed. These exams really give you a good insight into the French exam mindset. They are like battles with carefully stipulated rules of engagement and if you don't follow these you fail. If you intend to do any of these examinations it is worth doing the classes to learn the rules.

Here in Vichy I am doing the Internet dans la Classe de Français atelier (2 weeks) .This has been superb. We are looking at online cooperative activities, scavenger hunts, ice breaking activities, Hot Potatoes, Netquiz, Agora, Zoho, etc. I am then going to visit friends in England and then a couple of my CLA co-students from Norway. It is odd when your friends are younger than your children, but it keeps you young. This will be followed by a further one week stage in Vichy: Favoriser l'expression orale. The final weeks will be a catch up with friends in Besançon, and a quick visit to Normandy and Brittany (camping – I hope the weather will be good.)



Being away from my family has been challenging. I missed a wedding and the birth of my first grandchild. Without a supportive husband who was willing to let me go I could not have done it. There were long periods of loneliness at the beginning and learning to live on my own took time but the teachers at the schools were helpful and gradually I made contacts with other people here (rugby club, church, etc.)

I have made excellent contacts for myself and for my classes. There are whole possibilities for exchanges and visits opening up. Idées reçues

about France and the French have flown out the window. On a personal level – I am stronger and more confident in myself as a person and as a teacher.

This was my experience. I know that people who lived in other areas have had different work patterns and people who bring their families have a whole different set of challenges.

I am deeply grateful for the fact that I have been able to do this.

Margaret Ubels-Rattray

[Editor: Congratulations Margaret, on passing the difficult DALF C2!]

Margaret's Musings (taken from her letters home to NZ)

It's not official yet (I haven't seen the results) but I have been told that I have passed the DALF C2 exam. (the 'elite' exam – brag, brag). So I will have an official piece of paper that says I can in fact speak French to nearly total bilingual standard. I still have a long way to go really to be completely bilingual. I still tend to nod my head looking like I know what is being said and hoping like crazy for a word that will make it all come clear. It usually does now after not too long a time. I just have to hope that the conversation doesn't stop before that point is reached! I am going to celebrate with champagne. I just love that I can do that here without absolutely killing the bank!

Vichy, where I am staying, was once the most visited town in France because of the waters (I tasted them: warm minerals. OOH! Maybe you have to be sick, or trying not to be sick, to really appreciate them) and people came from all over to take the cure. It was made popular during Napoleon III's time and so heaps of money was poured into the place because the rich and famous came. However in the dying decades of last century the Vichy council, seeing the writing on the wall as far as the spa holiday industry went, (although there are still a lot of people who come) decided to diversify in the health area and built some pretty good sports amenities. People come from all over for tournaments and PE teachers or trainers can come here to finish their education. They also gave the green light to the CAVILAM idea and really supported the introduction of this satellite institute, attached to the Blaise Pascal Clermont-Ferrand University, which specialises in the pedagogy, research and training of languages' teachers. More recently there has been a moving into a technology niche of some kind.

One of the curious things I have observed here is how so many stereotypes actually have no real basis in fact.

French woman are all slim and well dressed – except the ones that are large and frumpy. French men are all good-looking and sexy. There are a lot that are not, believe me, but, yes, the ones that are, are both good-looking and sexy. French men are small and dark – except the tall blond ones. French people are arrogant and unfriendly – except the ones that are humble and friendly and welcoming (I can't think of any of the first sort that I have met). French schools don't have sports grounds – except the ones that do. French schools don't have sports teams and other extra-curricular activities. Well, sometimes they do. Just like anywhere, you can't lump them all together. One stereotype that really is true is the fact that at any

dinner they will spend half the time talking about food. And I really love the way people argue and discuss when excited about something. The facial and body language is so full of energy.

I also hadn't realised how 'tribal' people still are. The people in the south are different from those in the north. People in Franche-Comté are different from those in Normandy or those in Provence or in The Auvergne, etc. They all have their own specialities and their own accents, sometimes even their own language. 'We' are not like 'them'. The most popular film of recent times has been [Bienvenu chez les Ch'tis](#) which is about a civil servant who is sent north. All the clichés come out. It is a gentle take-off of the region (the film is made by someone from the area), but also of the attitude of the rest of France towards it – the food, the mannerisms, the language, the accent, etc. I really like French comedies and this one is great. I'm not sure how they are going manage to do the subtitles when they show it to anglophone audiences. A lot of the humour depends on the language misunderstandings.



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