

IMMERSION EXPERIENCES

Stepping outside the comfort zone

In this article Ali Turner from Ngatimoti school gives a personal view of some of the issues raised in the research in Dr Newton's article.

This talk was originally given at Christchurch Langsem's Celeb8

Our rural primary school has embraced the introduction of the 8th learning area. The old adage of the glass being half full rather than half empty has been a great way to look at yet another curriculum development. In our cluster of 7 small rural schools we have introduced a second language plan over the past 5 years. With integration and flexibility already happening in our primary schools, we can see many possibilities for including 2nd language teaching. Our cluster has looked positively at all Professional Development on offer and we have made it our mission to involve ourselves in as many PD opportunities as we can. An all expenses paid trip with the bonus of a "get out of ERO card" thrown in for good measure, was an opportunity not to be missed! With the support of my colleagues and school community, I jumped at the chance to apply for a full immersion experience through the Ministry of Education AFS award.

I have been teaching for over 20 years, with my only formal second language learning being 4th form Latin, School Certificate

French and UE German in 1980. I have been happily married for 19 years and have two teenage daughters. As a mother and a teacher I am often encouraging others around me to take some risks, have – a - go and step outside comfort zones. When the opportunity for travel to Europe (where I had never been before) and immerse myself in French and French culture came along, I thought that it was about time I followed my own advice and stepped out of my own comfort zone!

I must emphasise that this all happened over a year ago and that my recollections are based on my own experience. As in NZ I am sure that if I had been hosted by another family or school my perspective would be entirely different.

I was lucky enough to spend a month in Besançon - a city near the Swiss border. My host family consisted of Dad Pascal, a banker and Mum Françoise who was the Principal of my host school. Neither Pascal nor Françoise spoke any English. Daughter Anne-Sophie was a university student who had learned English as her essential second language. Unfortunately she had little interest or confidence in using her English but

fortunately for me, Gregory the 16 year old son, had recently returned from NZ as an AFS student. Poor Gregory became my lifeline. For me, being in France for only one month and with this being my first experience of travel in Europe, I learned quickly that School Cert French and using the Oui kit were only enough for survival mode. Although I had to do my best to understand and follow conversation, I had Gregory to check in with and explain aspects of culture and day to day life that I needed explained with some English!

When I first arrived at the family home, after 40 hours of travel, my fussy eating lifestyle, which I am renowned for all over NZ, was severely challenged. I was shown my room then escorted downstairs for dinner with no time to shower or change; just straight down to where the local dish of duck liver was proudly set in front of me. Now I promised myself I would try new things whilst away and fortunately I had no idea what I was eating at this stage and so I nibbled politely at it. Then came the salad – a bowl of lettuce which I enjoyed heartily before the main dish – grayish looking steak – I

did try to eat it but when Gregory cheerily announced that we had eaten the insides of the duck and now we were eating the outside, I suddenly didn't feel hungry anymore! It was probably about then that I really felt like I was in the position of the vulnerable learner! When I think back, it is just as well that I didn't know what the entrée was or I don't know that I could have attempted it! Maybe that was a good lesson for me – learners don't need too much information sometimes, small nibbles are more easily digested.

Early in my visit the family and I were invited to the High School Principal's 50th birthday. Now I am sure Gregory had no

interest in coming along to a dinner party for his Principal's birthday, however thankfully his parents persuaded him it would be a good idea. (I think they needed him as much as I did – hmmm I wonder how many of our NZ 16 year boys would do this without a lot of bribery!) On arrival at the Principal's house it seemed very much the same as a similar event in NZ. You know- people standing around a little awkwardly making polite conversation. There was a wide range of guests, from colleagues to family - including the Principals mother with her nasty wee dog that sat on her lap glaring at the



guests all through dinner. There was a wide array of alcohol, surprisingly simple food prepared and delivered by a caterer and then a long night sitting at the table deep in conversation till 3 a.m. I recalled a quote from a course in NZ "when you speak another language you become a different person" so I made a decision. Shy in real life, and never out after midnight, was the ordinary me, but here I could be courageous and stay out later! I entered into numerous conversations. Unfortunately they didn't last long as my limited French only allowed me to politely introduce myself and say where I was from. The conversation would then dry up because I couldn't keep up with it! As the night wore on I found some kind hearted people who (after a few good French wines) became a little braver, and attempted some conversation in English. Natalie, a particularly kind-hearted French woman, made an effort to ask me about my travels. When she asked me "And how many flies for NZ?" I didn't know what she was asking. Yes – word travels and it is true that we had a lot of flies last summer. Or maybe she was referring to all the sandflies that many of our overseas visitors find hard to tolerate? How many flies for NZ? What was this woman asking? Thankfully Gregory was able to step in as our intermediary and I had my first real inter-cultural laugh with him and Natalie. Natalie had wanted to know how many hours it took to fly to NZ!

This was the first of many good laughs I had – although more often than not they were at my mistakes!

Prior to my month long immersion, I innocently thought that I would come home so much more fluent and able to follow conversations. I expected it to be so refreshing – to meet people who knew nothing about me –and to be able to have a time in my life where I could make mistakes freely without repercussion.

I never really saw the funny side of my third day with the family until I got home to NZ and other people laughed at the situation. I was really keen to learn as much as I could and speak as much French as possible, and so I chatted away for 3 days without minding the few puzzled looks and the odd interruption from either Father or son to correct me. It was on that third evening after dinner when Pascal proudly presented me with a book of grammar, and then ushered me off to my room to learn it! Apparently the language I was speaking was "black language" and if I wanted to learn French then I needed to learn it the correct way!! I was mortified – I thought I was doing really well at getting my message across! This cultural element of the importance of studying, doing things "by the book" came thru loud and clear both at home and at school.

School; a large private Catholic school with a roll of over 700 5-11 year olds was situated in the city, 20 kms from where we lived. I knew very little about Catholicism, private schools or even large city schools!

On Day 1, Françoise took me into the staffroom, introduced me to the two teachers who were photocopying and then went off to her office. After what felt like ages, I asked the most likely looking of the pair in very hesitant French if I could come to class with her for the morning. Although I sensed a slight hesitation I spent the first two periods in the back of her maths and art classes trying to follow the lessons. I really felt like a duck out of water however by the art period I realized the students were going to be friendlier and far more helpful to me than this teacher. Actually, in hindsight I think she may have been a little threatened and I did feel sorry for the way I landed myself on her – I had to wonder if Françoise my host mother had discussed my arrival with the staff.

Later that first day I had the opportunity for a real laugh at myself. I still can't keep a straight face when I think about it, but unfortunately I had nobody to share it with at the time. I was being introduced to a woman and I was trying really hard to listen so I could follow with intelligent conversation. I replied to the introduction by jumping in and saying that I too had a daughter named Sophie. She was 16 and really interested in hearing about my experiences because she was learning French in NZ. Well to cut an embarrassing story short, the woman was being introduced to me as the teacher of Philo-sophy. Eager to make links and perhaps missing my family, all I heard was the Sophie part! I thought the woman was quite rude when she brushed me off and I was quickly ushered to a seat. I had no idea what I had done wrong until the woman began to teach. The penny dropped and I wanted to laugh raucously and explain myself, but I did know that by opening my mouth I would probably only make things worse for myself! Looking back now I understand that teachers in France don't seem to share much about their families anyway. Teachers were there to teach – and as great as most of them were, they seemed to know very little of each others personal lives.

It did not take me long to find some teachers who welcomed me into their rooms, and for me to realize that teachers are mostly compassionate and thoughtful people. Offering jaffas and pineapple lumps to all and sundry probably helped to break the ice! At this school, teachers were treated as professionals who more than able to deliver the required programmes, albeit in isolation from each other. There seemed to be little management structure for a school of this size with no Deputy Principal nor syndicate leaders. Staff meetings were timetabled once per term and from what I could see, were focused on exams and class compositions.

And so the weeks went – all quite hit and miss for me really, compared with the very structured way the French school system seemed to operate. As a teacher I would not have enjoyed the constraints of teaching in this system however it certainly seemed easier than ours where we seem to often be creating and re-

creating programmes, which teachers all over the country are no doubt also doing.

As a language learner, I found many of the teachers scary – but I will tell you what – if I was a student in France I know I would do my homework! Sitting in on English classes was interesting. Forget the games and interactive student centred individualized programmes, with learning intentions made clear to all. A modern kit with a variety of stories and activities was used, but each child had a book and work was completed page by page, even by the 6 and 7 year olds. but the students all seemed enthusiastic and treated their teachers with great respect!

I tried to keep in touch with my class back at Ngatimoti – unfortunately at my host school I had no access to internet or email. Actually I never saw a computer used by a student. But probably the best link I had between my class and these students was Wanda. Wanda is our class pet – sent to us in an art order and used in a variety of games and activities in class. My NZ students were more interested in the places I could take Wanda than where I might go myself “Take Wanda up the Eiffel Tower” “Can Wanda go in –Seine?” (that witty one came from my boss!) “Bring Wanda back a French boyfriend” so I obligingly touted Wanda around with me. She proved to be a great conversation starter and a good way of staying out of photos myself!

Another important link that ensured students, colleagues, friends and family could stay in touch, and share in some experiences was my blog site. This was a simple way of posting photos and a short diary for all to see – a kind of Just – in –time learning opportunity for my students and an opportunity to keep my experiences live and relevant to them. I had plenty of time in the evenings to do this at home, with no meals to organize, housework to do, meetings to attend or kids to run around after!

I appreciated the time to write, reflect and think just for myself. I wrote a diary where I promised myself lots of little changes both in my home life and my school life. At school I have used more formulaic language and have used my increased cultural understanding to spark

discussions and tell stories. We have made clay gargoyles, been on a French themed school camp and turned some local café chairs around like they had them in Paris.

I was lucky to have such an excellent host family who took me to movies, shows, and many incredible places like Strasburg, Paris and Versailles. Many of the photos I took have been valuable assets for lessons, and continue to give me new ideas each time I revisit them. Besides the amazing and interesting, I took photos of signs. These signs authenticated students learning. Now some of my students probably think that they could survive in France because they can read many signs! Since this AFS experience I have promoted second language learning even more than ever as I have first hand experience of the importance of it. I saw the importance schools in France place on learning a second language, with 5 year olds having compulsory English or German lessons at this school.

I have had more fun with my French lessons and taken more risks. I sat a DELF exam 6 months after returning from this adventure, and passed!

I have become a little more adventurous with the food I eat. I have proven to myself that I can survive if I eat duck and snails. I would still have difficulty with the virtually raw meat I was served, and thankfully I was never served horse meat (at least I don't think I was).

I have consciously taken less school work home and I have expected my daughters to pull their weight a bit more around the house. I have developed a greater appreciation for our NZ education system, and can see so much that we are doing here that we should celebrate.

If Colombo's message is Not a Problem then my message to you is, the new curriculum area doesn't need to be a problem. In France, the wine flows freely. I think we all need to remind ourselves in NZ that our glasses are at least half full!

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