

# IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

## Exchange from France

Barbara Cloonan (Glen Eden Intermediate School, Auckland)  
follows on from her 2006-2007 year in France

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Who is Thibaut Aguilhaume and how did he come to live in New Zealand for two months?

In 2006-2007 I was lucky enough to live in Besançon, France, for 12 months, as a recipient of one of the Ministry's Language Immersion Awards. A first time visitor to France, I was naturally excited but a little apprehensive. I arrived having very limited French so was concerned about how I would communicate and generally get things organised. My fears were confirmed - especially trying to battle with French beaurocracy, but over the course of the year everything gradually got better. During my time away I studied at the CLA (Centre de Linguistiques Appliquées) which was the principal reason for the improvement in my French. I also worked in two of the local schools where I taught English. Not ESOL trained, but fortunately with a few years experience under my belt, I was able to provide some reasonable learning experiences. Because of my association with the schools I was fortunate to meet and become friendly with several of the French teachers of English. One of these families was the Aguilhaumes.

When I returned to New Zealand with my husband and two of our three sons, my 15 year old stayed on in Besançon with the Aguilhaume family. Tom spent a further three months attending school and being fully immersed in French culture. He was particularly lucky since the 'man of the house', Fred Aguilhaume, is a rather famous Frenchman, having won two medals at the Para Olympic Games in equestrian events. Fred and Tom spent considerable time together which was great for Tom's French since Fred spoke virtually no English. Some of Tom's fondest memories of his time in Pouilley les Vignes were trying to keep up with Fred on their daily bike rides, Tom being just slightly humiliated that he was puffing to keep up with an 'old' 45 year old man who only has one leg! It was a great experience for Tom, and kindled what is hopefully a life long relationship with the Aguilhaume family.

This relationship has recently been reinforced, with Thibaut Aguilhaume, their 16-year-old son, coming to NZ and living with us for the two months of their summer. Unluckily for Thibaut, this has been one of Auckland's worst winters on record! Despite the weather, Thibaut was able to experience a fair bit of Kiwi culture, rain, food, rain, scenery, rain, schooling and ... a little rain.

During his time here, he visited a fair amount of the North Island: Piha and its famous rock, Matarangi (where he actually braved the surf!), Orewa for some surf life saving championships (including a blown out tyre en route), Bay of Islands (where he got to swim with dolphins), Kawakawa's Hundertwasser toilets (famous in NZ!), Waitangi, Whangaparaoa Peninsula, Rangitoto Island, Tane Mahuta in the Waipua forest, Kai Iwi lakes, and of course, West Auckland in detail! The highlights for him were the Whangarei Falls and I think, to be brutally honest, Sylvia Park shopping Centre. Oh, and a Ranfurly Shield match where, fortunately for us, Auckland were the victors.

Many cultural differences were highlighted for Thibaut while he was here. Our passion for rugby, our excessively different schooling system, our variety of food and our (well, ok, my) lack of ability to plan events. Fortunately for me, a close French friend who has now lived in NZ for 20

years was able to explain to Thibaut that planning is not exactly a Kiwi attribute. Certainly by the end of the two months I think he was a lot more laid-back in his approach to daily activities. I'm not sure that he'll be able to convince his family of the benefits of TV dinners though.

The biggest goal for Thibaut during his stay was to improve his English, and this was certainly achieved. He attended the Auckland English Academy for two weeks, plus of course was immersed in English at Glen Eden Intermediate where I teach. Here, I think is where the biggest difference between our two cultures is evident. The way we plan, teach and assess the individual, engage in discussions with our students, involve students in planning and assessment, constantly talk about thinking and learning with the students, our classroom environments draped in examples of student work, our playgrounds, our tuck shops... are all vastly different to the French experience. I was surprised by the French system, and I'm sure Thibaut was equally perplexed by our methods. Coming from a system where small group teaching doesn't exist, text books are paramount, and classrooms are very stark, almost clinical environments, I know he was puzzled by our approach. I'm not sure if either of us was able to convince the other whose system is better.



Thibault (left) with hosts  
Barbara and Tm  
Cloonan

To help with his English he also spent considerable time at home with a 'normal' (?) Kiwi family plus our friends and whanau. He went home armed with many kiwi colloquialisms. His accent in yeah and aye is better than mine! And I have to add that we had many a laugh teasing each other over the commentators' pronunciation of English and French names during the Olympics.

Time will tell whether or not a life-long friendship has been formed, but certainly an opportunity for the merging of two cultures has occurred as a direct result of the Award. So thanks MoE!

Advice for people thinking about applying for an award? You need to take the experience into your own hands. You will get as much out of it as you put in. For people already fluent it's a great way to really live the culture provided you are given homestay opportunities. For those whose language level is lower, as it was with me, you need to look into study opportunities, of which there are plenty. The experience has certainly improved my teaching of French. My knowledge of French culture is much improved, but more importantly, I feel as though I now have credibility when I'm talking to the students about France and its culture. I don't cringe with embarrassment when I'm asked if I've been to Paris – as would occur in the past. I share stories with the students: climbing the Eiffel tower, being part of a musical festival in the streets of Besançon, walking the streets of St Tropez amongst the rich and famous, being blown away by the beauty of Provence, the majesty of Mont Blanc in Chamonix, the history of Carcassonne... fantastic memories. I also feel a lot more confident when speaking French to the class, which has to be a good thing!

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