

Paul's journey into learning French

I started learning French when I was about 5. My parents, being English, often decided to go to France on holiday and we ended up spending quite a few summers in Normandy and Brittany, visiting the Loire Valley and the South of France. Often, during these trips, we were staying on campsites in caravans or "ready-to-live in" tents! These campsite breaks were the perfect time for me to go and buy the croissants from the shop. So, I learnt the numbers: "un, deux, trois, quatre" – in an accent that wasn't exactly French, it was my mother's!

I remember going to visit a zoo and hearing French people talk but not understand a word they were saying. It seemed to me that they were speaking really quickly; I realize now that in fact they weren't, it just seemed that way because I couldn't understand any of it.

I remember my first French lessons at school – a lady, with extremely large breasts called Mrs. Evenhart was the teacher. Carottes, poulet, jambon, we would repeat. People would crack up because the word "bras" (arm) sounded like "bra".

When I moved schools, I was ahead because I had done 2 years of French and 0 years of German, and the others at my new school had done only one year of each. At this stage, I have to say, I still couldn't speak the language, I was still learning in school.

I went through the usual school process learning grammar, with *être* and *avoir*, and that there are 12 verbs which take *être* as an auxiliary. I went through GCSE's, learning lists and lists of vocabulary in different categories for the exam.

Before that, though, I'd been on three French exchanges! Yes, three! My host the first year was someone called Nicola! Actually, he was a boy and called Nicolas but you pronounce it Nicola with the A pronounced the French way. His mother would say to me every day: "tu as bien dormi?" and I wouldn't understand so she had to explain and eventually, after 3 or 4 days, I got it. My second exchange partner wasn't so good: she was a girl and she turned out to have an English mum and speak pretty good English: better than my French was so my French didn't improve that much. The third exchange was with a boy called Eric, and I can't remember much except that I ended up crying one day because I was missing home.

When I chose A level French, I ended up studying some French literature and a lot of French grammar, some of which I didn't understand. The difference between "qui" and "que" was one I especially didn't get. It's to do with which is the object and which is the subject but as I didn't really understand what those terms meant, I could never do the exercises properly, kept making mistakes, and was lost. Before taking my A levels, my parents sent me on a 2 week intensive course in Bordeaux but it didn't help much because the lessons were good, but, in the evening and during the day, we were talking English with English and Irish people in the Irish pub with Irish music.

I majored in economics at university but my minor was French but the seminars, where we were supposed to speak French in pairs didn't really help. Neither did the language lab, with newspapers and French daytime tv, I remember watching a gameshow called *motus* and not understanding the principle. I was stagnating.

France: 1998. I arrived in August or September in Rennes, northern France (well, Brittany) to do my year as a teaching assistant. After a week of training in English in Rennes, I had to do a week of training in French! Normal French primary school teachers were being taught how to teach English to their classes and I was at the same training session. It was a case of sink or swim. Firstly, I had to understand. In the middle of this training session, I realized that the trainer was saying something I didn't understand. He was adding the word "quoi" to the end of every sentence. I wasn't understanding a word he was saying but when I realized he was saying this, I seemed to be able to "filter it out" better. Discussions at the coffee machine: I learnt the expression "tomber dans les pommes" – to fall in the apples, literally, to faint.

Living in a flat in the secondary school I was teaching in (I was mostly in primary schools, just a few classes in the “college”), I had the radio on ALL THE TIME! France info, France inter, repeating the same news at me all the time. Was I understanding it all ? Not by a long shot. But it definitely helped.

I’d chosen to be a teaching assistant because I’d hoped there would be no English people around. I was wrong, but there were less than there would probably have been at a university and everybody’s common goal was to learn French. I was with Italians, Germans and English people going out to bars and restaurants every night and talking French. Somebody suggested getting a book of expressions called “merde!” This included “griller le feu rouge” – “to run a red light” and other great expressions.

One French guy I’d met was helping me with my French. We’d go to the bar and I’d have trouble with my ‘u’ sound.

In English, you just have “you” (the sound), but in French you have ‘u’ (more high-pitched and acute) and ‘ou’ which is also different to the English sound. You have to make a different position with your lips when you say it, and especially, I think you have to hear the sound first. After several attempts it was getting better (and a good job it was too because apparently I was saying “merci beau cul! – instead of beaucoup) to the boulangère!

‘R’ was another problem, I spent hours in my room practicing in front of the mirror before I could finally say ‘rouge’!

There are still a couple of sounds in French I have difficulty with.

But the “qui” and the “que” had fallen into place. I still can’t tell you how. Well, actually, I can. It’s a process called acquisition. I’d been talking and to put across what I wanted to say, after 3 months, this had fallen into place. I’m capable now of explaining the grammar rule to you but at the time I wasn’t, and it didn’t matter. I’d cracked it.

“Ça y est” my primary kids would say when they’d finished their work, but I had to ask someone how to spell it because it sounded like something different. I’d learnt a new expression. I would write it down in my notebook back at the flat. 5 pages, 10 pages, 15 pages would accumulate.

I went back to Britain for a year, met Marie, came back to France to follow her, I got a job as an English teacher, then we went to Paris, came back to Lyon. Over the past twelve years, my French has developed.

The key, I would say ? Don’t worry about the grammar too much. Don’t get caught up on it. Focus on the vocabulary and the speaking and the rest will come with time. I’m learning Spanish, now and I’m using some of the lessons I’ve learnt through learning French.

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