

What happened because I learnt French

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I was born in the North-East of England to parents both originally from working class families in Birmingham. When my wealthier friends spoke of holidays in the South of France, skiing in Europe, or spending summers on the Mediterranean coast, I used to think it sounded wonderful, but that it would never happen to me!

Little did I know that one day the whole family, including three generations, would be able to visit me at home in one of the most beautiful areas in France, on the edge of Provence, and in the foothills of the Alps!

My mother loved languages at school and encouraged my curiosity, which was soon accompanied by a personal fascination with the structure of language - the study of linguistics and language, as a science rather than an art.

During my secondary school years I started to learn French and German, and continued with French, German and Mathematics to A-level, because I found languages easy, (Maths is, in many ways, a language...) and ended up at Bangor University where I studied French and some Italian.

Then, during my year abroad I was sent to Mazamet, South West France, where I met a French man - and my oral French became exceptionally good - without any conscious effort, (when you spend all your time speaking the language to your boyfriend!...) When I came back from France I was easily one of the best at oral French in my group and got a distinction in the finals oral exam. I began to learn to work harder and gained confidence. I even won a prize to travel abroad and visit French museums: a prize which became unnecessary in some ways, as I graduated on the Wednesday, married my Frenchman on the Saturday and moved to live in France in the Drôme in July 1991, where I've been ever since...

I obtained French citizenship as my husband was French, but finding a job corresponding to my qualifications was a challenge indeed. At first I was a cleaning lady in a supermarket...

We lived in Valence then, opposite a technical college, where one day I saw an advert for an open day. I decided to study to be a bilingual PA, and did a two year course equivalent to a HND. I learnt to use a computer - I was not of the computer generation - and to type, a skill which became invaluable in my future career. Although I was the only foreigner in the class I came first in the final exams, which encouraged me, despite my lack of confidence, to accept the head's offer of a job as a teacher in the college. There had been a change in the French curriculum and they needed someone with bilingual capacities to teach administrative methods in English. I had never wanted to be a teacher: it did not appeal to me, and I associated it with discipline problems, but I thought I would try anyway

... and I loved it!

Several years later I studied for the national exams to become a qualified teacher, beginning with the CAPES and then the Agrégation - these are competitions - only a few people are selected - and they have quite difficult orals in front of impressive juries. You not only have to be good at languages, but you have to be better than many of the other candidates as the places are so limited. Examination exercises included seven-hour dissertations in English and French, literary translation, analytical grammar, which I had never really studied before, not even in my mother tongue. In the orals we had to do almost instantaneous translation of newspaper articles, summaries of radio interviews in English with any local or international accents, syntheses of three or four documents on unknown themes of cultural interest.

My biggest advantage was being English and a trained linguist through my university studies; accent, sentence structure were easy. All the same, it took me a total of 8 years to get first the CAPES, then the Agrégation, the highest qualification available for a teacher. It was hard for me but little by little the rigorous and methodical French system taught me to love languages in literature, and even language teaching, as an art!

Meanwhile I gained experience teaching students through lower school, from primary to university level.

I have recently started teaching English literature to sixth form students. If someone had told me I would do that one day when I was a struggling A-level pupil, I would never have believed it!

We eventually moved to live in Crest, a small medieval town in the Drôme, where the mayor for 25 years was a former MP (*député*) and minister in the French government. Two years after I obtained the Agrégation, he asked me to become a member of his team and I was elected with him to the town council in 2020. This was a great opportunity to learn new skills, both administrative and interpersonal, while continuing with my teaching. I became one of eight deputies to the mayor (responsible for social services) and a member of the twinning committee.

The French and British systems for local government are quite different. My duties include: chairing board meetings for the management of town social services and the community centre, overseeing the work of the civil servants employed by the town in social work, participating in local council meetings in the town and the local area, being a registrar for weddings, a counting officer for local and national elections, going to meetings and events of many local social charities... and all that in French! I will be a candidate along with the new mayor, as the former has retired, for the next municipal elections in 2026...

I really love sharing my experience with family and friends who come to visit. This year my 14 year-old nephew spent 10 days work experience with my eldest daughter in a tree-top climbing centre; he too is learning French... His father, my brother, does seasonal work in the Alps as a mountain guide. His first visits to France were as a young man when he would bring his bike to visit and ride on some of the mountain roads, or mountain climb with his (future) wife and brother-in-law in the Vercors. My sister is a published author and her novels include scenes in the Alps and the occasional French quotation too ...

I love many things in my life and not least living in a sunny climate in one of the most beautiful areas of France, close to the Alps, not far from the Mediterranean, amongst vineyards, olive groves, orchards with apricots, peaches, kiwis, almonds, walnuts; also goat's cheese and dried ham, and of course my French family, including my three bilingual children who have also benefited

from languages in finding work in tourism, transport, education, commerce... One of them studied in Hereford as a British national, since my original nationality is hereditary even as far as my grandchildren. She is currently working and hoping to set up a career in Britain.



A photo of me at the town hall wearing the red white and blue ribbon just before officiating at a wedding.