

Nr 32 – August - September 2011

Vivre en France — Loads of Opportunities

September signals the return to studies and language learning is a popular and important objective at this time of the year. Nowadays, language learners can either consider themselves lucky because of the numerous approaches and language programmes available, or on the contrary, they can be overwhelmed and confused in choosing the appropriate route. It is a long winding road to get to the speaking and understanding comfort level we wish to reach. However, we can all get there if we find our most appropriate learning method and environment, and if we adopt some good learning habits. Of course, the learning process might take longer if we are not living in the country where the language is spoken, but thanks to the internet and long distance learning programmes, we can still progress at our own pace. To help you find a French learning routine or to help you break the fear barrier of speaking, this article gives you a list of suggestions that you may want to adopt when learning French.

If you are living in or visiting France

1. You can benefit from your situation by **involving the French locals in your learning process**. You'll be surprised how positively responsive they can be. They are not going to judge you negatively because you are speaking French to them; most probably they will be pleasantly surprised, find you courageous and perhaps even be a bit amused. Either way, they will gain respect and admiration. When speaking to French natives, do not hesitate to ask them if what you said was correct or if you have used the right word, or even the right verb conjugation! I'll never forget when a student of mine ran to the *boulangerie* right after having learned the *passé composé* and said to *Madame la boulangère*: "*La semaine dernière, j'ai acheté le pain rustique et je veux la même chose aujourd'hui*". At the end of his request, he asked *la boulangère*: "*Est-ce que mon verbe était bien? Le passé composé est bon ?*" The *boulangère* responded by laughing and said that it was excellent. Each time he met the people in the village, he would ask for feed-back, and he would not only get it but make friends this way. A lot of laughter was also heard which made it fun and pleasant all around.

Perhaps, you're thinking "but I might annoy the French if I ask them to help me or if I try to speak with my poor French level!" Generally the French are grateful that you are trying.

Don't worry about annoying, insulting or embarrassing anyone: If you start your conversations by saying "*Mon français n'est pas très bon, je suis désolé*", then you've warned them and you should feel more confident in speaking. For example, at school we learn the correct usage of the "*vous*" and the "*tu*" forms and how we always have to be very respectful when speaking in French. The French are very tolerant when these often unspoken rules are broken by foreigners – you are allowed to make mistakes... as long as you add the words such as "*pardon, je suis désolé, excusez-moi, s'il vous plaît, merci beaucoup, etc...*".

2. Read the local adverts sheets and newspapers: Challenge yourself with some reading and observe the sentence constructions. It doesn't matter if you just understand a small percentage of it. What's interesting is analysing the word order, the tenses being used, the gender of the words, etc... Going to the local café and reading the newspaper could become a very pleasant daily habit.

3. Let the salesmen speak to you: If you live in France, you will most definitely receive a few phone calls on a weekly basis from a company trying to sell a product. I remember speaking with a French student who amused me when she told me: "I love it when a salesman calls me! I see it as an opportunity to learn French!" She is right... The salesmen want to sell; therefore, they will more likely be patient and pleasant over the phone.

4. Go to the local stores, attend fairs and festivals, and also use the local services, etc: Many foreigners hesitate to go to the hairdresser, for example. Some even wait for their vacation to England or elsewhere to get a haircut! This is too bad, as chatting a little with the hairdresser may be an excellent way to learn a few typical French expressions. Again, these people are usually friendly, and they want to please their customers. There is no reason why it shouldn't go well. And they will also probably even pay more attention to make sure that your hairstyle is exactly what you hope because their reputation is at stake. Try to use the local services as much as you can, and shopping at the open air markets regularly will give you the opportunity to become acquainted with the locals...

5. Watch French TV! If you are lucky to be living in a French speaking country, you should take advantage of this situation by watching French programmes on TV. Perhaps you don't like to watch TV. You can, however, try to think of it as very useful learning tool. Any linguistic expert will tell you that you need hundreds of hours of listening to develop your listening comprehension. Your ear needs to be trained to recognize the new sounds of the language. Many foreigners have a negative attitude toward French TV, but there are some good programmes. You just need to find the one which appeals to you. You should at least listen to the weather forecast, the ads (the ads are very short stories and you will hear lots of repetition in each one); as well as the cartoons, game shows and travel programmes. You can learn a lot from these various media sources! They can be a wonderful learning tool.

Here is a suggestion of some programmes you might enjoy:

Télématin

This cool and relaxed broadcast, which means "Tele Morning" and shown on *France 2*, is "on" every weekday morning from 6:30 to 8:45. It is composed of a short news report every half hour, weather forecasts, with the rest of the time devoted to other short stories often grouped around a particular theme: gardening, cooking, books, consumer news, travel, movies, etc. The graphics and visual aids used make it much easier to understand.

Des chiffres et des lettres

This is probably the most popular and the oldest (it was created in 1972) televised game. As its title suggests, "*Des chiffres et des lettres*" (numbers and letters) consists of two parts: making easy mental calculations, and composing words from a selection of letters. The latter is by far the most interesting as a language learning tool. It is broadcast on *France 3* Monday through Friday at 17:30, and is also rebroadcast by *TV5 Monde*.

France 24

This is a relatively new 24-hour International TV news channel which is designed to compete with CNN and BBC World Report but also to present a French perspective on world news. What is interesting for Anglophones willing to learn French is that it is broadcast on two different channels, one in English and the other in French. As the same stories are shown simultaneously on both channels and at several times during the day, it might be useful to watch them in both languages, one after the other, to make sure you understand the content and pick up some tips on pronunciation. However, this channel is accessible in France only by satellite, cable (in some cities) or through some internet ADSL providers.

Info: www.france24.com.

Click on *Comment recevoir la chaîne* at the bottom of the home page.

7. Radio: If you are against the idea of having a TV in your home, then you can always choose to listen to some radio programmes such as *France Info*. It is one of the stations of the French public radio system, it broadcasts short news stories on a constant basis, and the stories are repeated frequently, so you get a second or third chance to listen to and understand them.

If you are not living in France and learning French

Thanks to the internet, you have access to an incredible choice of resources which gives you the opportunity to practice your French at every level. In addition to your regular French class (you have many possibilities of finding distance learning programmes; for example, our language school, Learn French at Home*, offers lessons with a French native teacher via Skype), you could continue to work on your listening comprehension through viewing videos, podcasts and songs; and you could improve your writing and broaden your vocabulary database through reading articles or stories.

Ideally, it is best to a little bit of French work regularly, such as 3 or 4 times per week.

Suggestions and free websites to practice your French listening comprehension:

1. Television: In most countries, it is possible to subscribe to the channel *TV5 Monde* (www.tv5.org) which will give you the opportunity to watch movies, the international news, travel programmes, and much more. For example, if you live in the US, you could be watching the French channel on your TV!

If you cannot get *la chaîne TV5 Monde*, then you should consider viewing **French videos online**. It is very helpful to be able to hear the sounds of the language along with some visual. Below, you will find a suggested list of websites:

* www.learnfrenchathome.com

Television: Suggested list of websites

www.bbc.co.uk/languages/french/mafrance/flash

A series of videos for the French level beginner.

www.tv5.org/TV5Site/enseigner-apprendre-francais/accueil_apprendre.php

This is the website of TV5 Monde and they have dedicated a section to French language learning. You may view videos and do the exercises in relation to them. There is a beginning section as well as a more advanced one.

www.flevideo.com/index.php

Quiz videos: listen to one of these fun and short videos and do a multiple question quiz. You may choose the video according to your level (A1 to B2).

www.tsr.ch/docs

Reports on real life stories such as families moving to foreign countries, travel, etc...

www.thalassa.france3.fr/index-fr.php?page=educ

Thalassa is a popular French TV educational programme on the sea and travel.

www.chocolat.tv/chocolat-tv.html

Short videos on travels; for intermediate level learners. The script is read a bit slower than a French native's pace.

www.arte.tv

An excellent quality channel for watching movies, news and cultural programmes.

2. Podcasts: Short audio programmes, stories or conversations, which you can listen on the computer or download onto an MP3 (or similar device). We have selected three free podcast sites (see below). There are plenty of others but they require a fee.

Podcasts: A few websites

French podcasts:

www.french-podcasts.com

You can listen to a podcast, then read it in a pdf format. I would suggest to first listen without reading the written version and see how much you've understood; then read it while listening to it again.

Français facile:

www.podcastfrancaisfacile.com

Another very good website: you will find a nice selection of stories and some of them focus on grammar.

Radio France Internationale

www.rfi.fr/lffr/statiques/accueil_apprendre.asp

Listen to the recordings and try to respond to the questions. RFI also has a daily news bulletin in easy French. Look for the link for *Les infos en français facile*

3. Articles/Stories

Of course, there are tons of possibilities for working on your reading comprehension with the

French online newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, etc... In addition, we found an interesting site where you can test your understanding of an article through the exercises associated with each article called *1 Jour 1 Actu*¹ (one day one piece of news).

For the more advanced learners, you can enjoy reading the cartoons from **Courrier International**² not only will you learn some new expressions but it is a good way to keep updated on French news and culture.

Another good exercise is **to listen to French songs** and try to understand the lyrics. In each French Accent Magazine, we like to introduce a song for you to discover... There are many videos available on the net for listening to French songs; you could just Google the artist's name, discover who they are and listen to a few of their songs. Of course, it helps if the singer has a clear pronunciation when singing so you could try to listen to singers like: Georges Brassens (an idol to many contemporary singers); Renan Luce; Grand Corps Malade; Jacques Brel; Bénabar; Patricia Kaas; Benoît Doremus; Vincent Delerm; Francis Cabrel; Linda Lemay; Bernard Lavilliers and Maxime Leforestier. Discovering French music is getting to know and understand a very important part of the French culture.

4. French immersions

If you are a French learner at the beginning level, home stay immersions might be a bit too difficult and challenging. When you go live with a French family for one week or two, technically you must speak French all day and if you do not have the basics, you will struggle on almost every word and find yourself exhausted by the end of day... Sure you'll learn, but you will not have gained much after one week. However, if you have already acquired a certain comfort level with the basics and wish to apply what you have learned in a real context, then doing an immersion is a very good idea. A typical immersion includes a few hours of lessons per day, eating meals with the family and perhaps some cultural excursions. You should also have a few hours to yourself during the day to rest from speaking French and the family usually needs some time to themselves to do some errands...

There are many language schools offering French immersions. Just make sure that you do your homework and ask lots of questions before booking.

5. *L'Alliance française* or other French institutes: if you live near a big city, you might have access to a French institute where you can perhaps join a conversation group, rent French DVDs, books, etc... You should see if there is an *Alliance française*, or any other French cultural institution, in your area. Or perhaps you could try to put an ad in the paper and look for a French native and start a French conversation group? They're becoming more and more popular around the world...

In conclusion, if you wish to make some real progress, try to grab every opportunity that comes your way... Perhaps you have a job that requires that you travel to a French speaking country. Take advantage of this travel time to practice what you have learned! Even better, if you meet a French colleague, initiate the conversation in French!

By putting your fears aside or letting go of the false idea that you are annoying French people when you are speaking French and by involving them in your French learning, not only will

you improve but you will also enjoy the experience at a deeper level. Again, have look at the available free resources on line and make the most it! We are truly lucky to have so much at hand...

Céline Anthonioz

¹<http://1jour1actu.com>

²<http://cartoons.courrierinternational.com>

Useful expressions

Est-ce que vous pourriez m'aider, s'il vous plaît ? = Could you help me please?

Comment est-ce qu'on dit ça ?/Comment on dit ça ? = How do you say that?

Vous dites comment ? = How do you say?

Comment dit-on... ? = How do you say...?

Est-ce que vous pouvez répéter ?/Vous pouvez répéter, s'il vous plaît ? = Could you repeat, please?

Vous pouvez redire ? = Could you say it again?

Est-ce que vous pourriez parler moins vite ?/Vous pouvez parler moins vite, s'il vous plaît ? = Could you speak a bit more slowly, please?

Je n'ai pas bien compris = I haven't understood well.

Je n'ai rien compris, désolé(e) ! = I have understood nothing, sorry!

Excusez-moi de vous ennuyer encore... = I am sorry to bother you one more time...

N'hésitez pas à me dire si je me trompe = Don't hesitate to tell me if I am wrong.

Je me suis encore trompé ? = Am I wrong again?

Elle est correcte, ma phrase ? = Is my sentence correct?

Est-ce que je mets 'depuis' ou 'pendant' ? = Should I say 'from' or 'during'?

Un miroir, c'est féminin ou masculin ? = A mirror, is it masculine or feminine?

Je dois utiliser 'être' ou 'avoir' dans cette phrase ? = Should I use 'to be' or 'to have' in this sentence?

Je ne sais pas ce que je ferais sans vous ! = I don't know what I would do without you!

Vous êtes vraiment très gentil(le), merci beaucoup ! = You're really so kind, thank you so much!

Merci pour votre patience ! = Thank you for your patience!