

Real Life — Interview: Sébastien Babolat, a French Expatriate and Entrepreneur in California

Meet Sébastien Babolat, the ‘father’ of French language podcasts! Every week, 40,000 people on the net download Sébastien’s podcasts to practise their listening skills and to discover different aspects of French culture. Find out what a podcast is and why they’ve become so popular.

Céline Anthonioz: You manage a website of French podcasts*. Concretely, what is a podcast?

Sébastien: A podcast is no more than just a radio show that you can listen to anywhere at anytime. This is the new way of listening to your favourite radio show – no need anymore to stick close to a radio box and wait for your show to air: you can now download it and listen to it on your MP3 player (ipod, zune or anything). The ability to do so, led to the creation of many independent radio shows, without any specific knowledge or understanding (and without the hassle!) of a streaming program by airwaves or FM/AM band.

C.A.: Would you please explain what else the website offers?

S.: During the weekly show that I have produced for more than 2 years now, I have greatly expanded what I offer: I try to expose the listeners to all of the cultural aspects of French culture, as I believe that this is the best way to learn a language. On each show, I play some French artists, a book or a movie review, some words and sentences on a specific topic and a conversation (and a grammar point). On top of the “show” there is a transcript so listeners can follow and read what is said, I also propose a bilingual book, with a side by side text (a chapter of a particular book a week), a video vocabulary to associate words with a picture... And much more!

To help listeners in their learning experience I answer any of their questions on a forum. They also can share their thoughts, travelling tips and discovery of anything French by posting articles on the blog that was made for them.

C.A.: Every week, there are 40,000 downloads on the podcasts you create! What makes them so popular? What type of subjects do you speak about?

S.: After speaking to a lot of listeners, I think that what they like is the fact that they can have many different aspects of the culture within a single show: music, books, movies, audio excerpts, as well as vocabulary and grammar. I feel it helps them enjoy the language. I usually take a subject and talk about it for 2 weeks (on 2 podcasts). Subjects range from “the house”, “the doctor’s office”, “the Tour de France”, etc. They are various but always connected to something you can use in everyday life.

The website and the podcasts are also really personal: a lot of listeners help me in the production of the podcast (I call the volunteers the members of the “podtourage”). They correct my English, discover new subjects, and even help with the graphic design of the web site.

C.A.: What motivated you to create podcasts on a weekly basis?

S.: Two years ago I had an internship at a company in California and wanted to take the opportunity to get back to my Spanish that I had long forgotten. I started looking for a radio station (and/or a podcast) like NPR (or the BBC worldwide) in Spanish. There was nothing that I really liked. I wanted something where I could listen to a little bit of everything.

By curiosity I looked for French and there was also nothing – so I decided to try my hand in that new medium.

I was hoping for a handful of listeners, and was willing to create a show for them. From the start it was a success and the rest is history!

C.A.: You offer the podcast services for free but there is an option to receive more French work in the membership area in exchange for a small fee – can you explain what the membership gives to the reader?

S.: I used to give everything for free, as I really do believe in free education. But at the same time, I really wanted to push the podcast to the next level and wanted to be able to offer more, for everyone.

This is why I created the members section. In this section, listeners can find some basic lists of vocabulary, some “podcast extras” (such as the bilingual side by side text, flash cards and the podcast in an enhanced form).

I also try new ways to help people understand French as it is spoken: there are videos with commentary, books made by *Frenchie Productions* (the company I created), audio books, tips and tricks for travelling in France, exercises, dictations, etc. I also have an “interactive” section where listeners can speak and practice their French. I will soon update this section to have a better layout and an easier access. In the membership section I also try new things: parts of a DVD that I am in the process of creating will be available for the members.

C.A.: You’ve had great reviews in the press! Were you one of the pioneers to start the French podcasts? What are they saying about you?

S.: I was, as far as I know, the first to create a language podcast as they exist today. The press gave me some good reviews as other language podcasts use what I have done to apply to theirs: the fact that you can get a video, a pdf and an audio file from itunes (when you subscribe) and the weekly format (even if now other podcasts propose their show on a daily basis).

The articles I’m mentioned in usually explain what a podcast is and what mine, in particular, has to offer. They like the fact that I have a cultural component as well as traditional grammar points. It is funny for me when I talk to other language podcasters: they always refer to me as the “father of language podcast”! There is a nice group of us, talking to each

other every now and then, exchanging ideas and tips.

C.A.: Sébastien, today you live in Monterey, in California – do you miss France? If so, what aspects of France or French life do you miss?

S.: I miss France a lot, but mostly for the everyday little things: a good croissant (made with plenty of butter) or a *pain au chocolat* (a chocolate croissant), a real baguette, food in general (which tastes very different!), the way the cities are designed (including public transportation!), etc. Mostly I miss my friends and my family.

C.A.: Being a Frenchman from Cannes, what can you say about this beautiful region? What is a true ‘Cannois’?

S.: I truly love the south of France: I love going to the beach, I like having sunny days all year long and I like when the weather is warm! What’s great with the south is that we are not far (within one hour) from anything you may need: the beach, skiing, national forest, along with many historical sites.

A real “Cannois” is hard to describe, but we are known for being laid back, talking passionately with our hands and exaggerating our stories! We have a lot of families of Italian descent in Cannes, so we fit some of the Italian stereotypes as well! Cannes is a really great place, and it is best in either June or September, when the weather is still nice and there are fewer tourists.

C.A.: In your opinion, are there any aspects of American life that you feel are more appealing or positive than some aspects of French life?

S.: I really like some aspects of American life: the entrepreneurship, the freedom in general (stores open later or on Sundays) and the interactions with people (it is sometimes a bit easier and quicker here to make acquaintances). Something that I really like is the cultural interaction: there are so many different people with diverse cultures, living together and respecting each other. I learn a lot from others in the USA, simply by asking and being a little curious, as Americans are very open.

C.A.: Anything else you would like to add?

S.: There is something funny about French people in the USA (or French speaking persons); when you come here, you can clearly notice the different neighbourhoods of a city (the Chinese part, Italian quarter, etc.) except for one: the French. Every city I try to visit, it seems that French restaurants are spread out and aren’t placed together. It is therefore a bit harder to determine where they hang out. But that is also the fun part of it... we have to hunt for the French!

* www.frenchpodclass.com