

# Learn French? Of Course You Can!

The First Self-Help Guide  
For French Learners



A Languages at Home Publication

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## FOREWORD

THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THIS BOOK are: to motivate those of you who want to learn French — or any other language for that fact —, to encourage you to set goals and to strive to meet them, to help you overcome any obstacle you might encounter along the long road of immersing yourself in a new language, and to fully enjoy the voyage.

This book is the direct result of our experiences as language teachers. We are a team of French teachers giving all our lessons face to face — or, rather, screen to screen through Skype — to individual students of various ages, origins, backgrounds, living all over the world, who all share the same endeavor: learning French, and the same wish: being able to feel comfortable, someday, communicating in this language that they have chosen for whatever personal or professional reason.

From the very beginning and throughout the lessons, we constantly remind our students of the basics of learning any new foreign language, among which the most important might be: "Don't be afraid!..."

Ten years after the creation of our first online school, *Learn French at Home*, followed by the inclusion of other languages, such as *Learn English at Home*, we came to the conclusion that we needed to write a specific self-help book specifically geared to learning French. Such a book does not yet exist.

Learning a language is the introduction to a new land, the land of another culture, which suggests that you should take the time to open the many doors and windows that you will have the wonderful opportunity to meet all along this journey. As the psycholinguist Frank Smith rightly said: "One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way." Learning another language may allow you to submerge yourself much more deeply into the culture of another country.

*Learn French? Of Course You Can!* is a book that will help you to become confident by reminding you that the French language might not be so difficult after all, and that it is rather recent, born from many regional dialects and foreign influences and solidified as a language not too long after the French Revolution. A language that you should not see as a towering mountain almost impossible to climb but as a series of small hills that will allow you, all along the path, to admire its variety, originality, and beauty.

Above all, this book's purpose is to provide you with a multitude of tips and tricks on learning French, and with all the very important self-help advice that we constantly give to our students during their lessons.

Just as our students often become friends over time (friends that we may even invite into our homes after a while), we hope that this book will help you to feel more at home in the French language, to enjoy every minute of your study, to appreciate the progress you make, to have fun, and to not be afraid of making mistakes. After all, the French, too, make mistakes!

Learning a language is an exciting adventure, full of unexpected turns but, above all, it brings a powerful feeling of personal accomplishment and satisfaction.

*Alors, prêts pour l'aventure ?*

Céline and Vincent Anthonioz,  
Annick and Roger Stevenson

## 1. JIM, THE CALIFORNIAN WHO IS IN LOVE WITH FRANCE

WHAT DO I LOVE about France? Almost everything. I love reading a French newspaper while eating a croissant in the morning at a little sidewalk café, watching people walking in the street, I love Serge Gainsbourg and his provocative attitude, his music, the relationships he had with artists of his generation, I love Juliette Binoche, I love Godard movies, French wines, French cheese, *magret de canard*, the architecture of Paris, especially the Haussmann buildings, the small villages in the South, I love the atmosphere of the *quartier Saint-Germain* in Paris, I love the Seine, the Luxembourg gardens...

We could go on for hours. Jim never tires of speaking about this country that he simply adores, and he loves the French, too, whom he finds "very warm and generous." He also said: "The French language has always held an allure for me, but I don't really understand why." Jim, a typical Californian born in Hollywood, gifted with a very positive and friendly personality, was 15 when he first decided to learn French. But he really started at the age of 45, and then only from a distance, by Skype, first with Céline, the founder of

*Learn French at Home*, then with other teachers of the same team. He has never been to France more than five weeks in a row, every two to five years, and still, he has made considerable progress over the years in his fluency in the language. He is now 55, is a busy professional as one can be in the USA, spending long days and evenings solving other people's and companies' computer problems. That is his job. And yet, he has reached an impressive advanced level which allows him to read difficult novels in French, to listen to complex political discussions, to understand the lyrics of many French songs, and to speak easily on the phone with his French friends in their language, or to have interesting conversations with them when they share a dinner together.

Why? Mainly because Jim is, and remains, highly motivated.

There are other reasons, too. As we said, Jim has a positive attitude, he is keen to learn, always remains modest, laughing about his mistakes, and he is never afraid, either to be wrong while saying something in French, or to initiate a French conversation in French with French people whom he does not know. And he has a goal: to be able to walk in the streets, not only of Paris but of any little village in any region of France, anywhere he won't risk meeting people who speak English, and to be able to communicate easily with the locals, to have a coffee and chat with other customers about any news story of interest to them, to live, and speak, like a French person.

Like so many other French learners who try their best to speak and understand better this new language, Jim is doing his best to achieve this goal, so that he can fully appreciate the best of France.

*...I love Godard movies, French wines, French cheese, magret de canard, the architecture of Paris, especially the Haussmann buildings, the small villages in the South, I love the atmosphere of the quartier Saint-Germain in Paris, I love the Seine, the Luxembourg gardens...*  
Jim, a student of *Learn French at Home*



## 2. WHY DO PEOPLE STUDY FRENCH?

WHAT IS THE ATTRACTION of France? Why do so many people love this country and want to visit it? Why do they want to learn French?

The French language seems to have become very trendy recently in Anglophone countries, maybe more so than a few years ago. This is evident in many ways. For example, if you add a few words in French to any speech or any presentation of a new play or musical, or if you even slightly alter the script of a musical to add something in French, as we noticed in a few Broadway shows, the public will like it — or at least this is what the producers and performers think. Even Disney movies consider it to be a sign of sophistication. We were surprised when we watched the latest film adaptation of *Cinderella*, to hear an occasional expression in French in the dialogues...

When we ask our students why they want to learn French, they first reply that they want to study the language because France is a country with a rich history and culture. They love the art, beauty and diversity of the countryside, of the cities and of their architecture, and everything else that makes France famous. Overall, they tell us that they particularly like the spirit of independence, luxury products, cheeses, museums (Le Louvre being rated first, with its renewed Italian Mona Lisa), wines, freedom of speech, gastronomy, literature, French cinema, the Eiffel Tower and other monuments, cartoons, croissants, romantic love... And the list goes on and on

with everything considered to be the best of France, and that is also very cliché. Even if you point out what is cliché among all this and if you show them other aspects of France, they will keep their rose-colored glasses on and will see France as in Woody Allen's movies, *Magic in the Moonlight* or *Midnight in Paris*, that Jim, and so many other students, adored, of course.

Visiting France is certainly fascinating. But why should anyone learn the language? So many people nowadays travel to Brazil, to Peru, to Thailand, without feeling the need to learn Portuguese, Spanish or Thai. "Because I love this language," most of them say, "especially its intonation," add a few. "Because I love listening to French songs and I want to be able to understand them," others say, or "I want to be able to watch French movies without having to read the subtitles." A few, such as Jim, would even say that they find French politics fascinating and want to know more about it! "I also appreciate the level of political discourse in France and would like to understand it better, especially when I watch *Les Guignols de l'info*", a satirical puppet show on TV that presents a daily interpretation of the news.

However, the majority would say that they intend to visit France regularly because they like the country, and that speaking French would make their trip much more interesting and rewarding; and some may wish to stay a few months in the future, or even buy a house and become an expat... One of our students, R., from Canada, told us that it is the music and lyrics of a French-speaking singer from Belgium, Stromae, who incited him to learn French. Some students have French friends with whom they would love to speak in their language from time to time. Other students would dare to say: "Maybe I will meet a French lover one day if I speak better French?" To which we reply: "Then you shouldn't worry, it is the best way to learn French!" Very few intend to learn French because of a professional necessity, or because they intend to work for a French company or an agency based in France. Much less so than the students of *Learn English at Home*, who, for the majority, have a specific professional goal.

A survey conducted in 2016 of the readers of the magazine we publish every two months since 2006, *French Accent Magazine*, revealed that more than 75% of our readers were learning French out of pleasure, and only 2% for business reasons (the others because they had moved, or were intending to move, to France).

In a rather humorous and provocative editorial, *Do you really want to learn French...? Or...?*, published on the website of the European Parliament, Jean-Louis Boutefeu, a professional French literary translator, started by saying:

French is a very complicated language, you know — replete with irregular (if not plain illicit) verbs, silent letters, unpronounceable words and exceptions to non-existent rules; an illogical language, periodically attacked by the spelling reformers; a dangerous language, in whose name a misplaced comma can lead to murder and capital letters ceaselessly let slip the dogs of war.

After a few more paragraphs, in which he deplores, among other things, the new habit, partly out of laziness or snobbish taste, that drives the French to use more and more English words in their daily language, he declares:

Learning French will give you access, in the original, to a whole host of experiences, of which I shall now cite a few pell-mell, with no claims to exhaustiveness: the poems of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the songs of Nougaro and Barbara, the novels of Camus, Sarraute, Vian, Echenoz and Manchette, the adventures of Astérix and the fortunes and misfortunes of *Le Petit Nicolas*. But, above all, you will gain access to a language which can be gross and subtle at one and the same time — and

tender, moving, elegant, cruel, bitter and icy — a language in which a single sentence, or even a single word, can have ten different meanings depending on intonation alone — a language which has the gift of reproducing the whole gamut of feeling and emotion, human and inhuman, in tones ranging from the hyper-exuberant to the magnificently discreet.

He concludes by saying: "French should be learnt because it is, quite simply, the most beautiful language in all this world and all the neighboring worlds — or, rather, the most beautiful, naturally, except for your own native language."

*...you will gain access to a language which can be moving, elegant, cruel, bitter and icy [...] a language which has the gift of reproducing the whole gamut of feeling and emotion, human and inhuman, in tones ranging from the hyper-exuberant to the magnificently discreet.*

Jean-Louis Boutefeu, literary translator