

# Lessons on learning

Nicola Christinger-Grant shares her experiences of integrating a reluctant daughter into the French language

The key to any good meal or recipe is good preparation – organise everything well in advance, prepare yourself, and the finished product should be perfect. I decided to take on this theory in my preparations to once again repatriate – this time to Nîmes in the south of France.

With our impending move getting closer, my preparations seem to be mainly focused on my elder daughter, Victoria (12), getting as much experience and exposure to learning French as possible. After eight happy years in Zürich, my French husband and I have decided that now is a perfect time to make the break. Our youngest daughter is two and a half and has really no idea of the move – only that she calls France *bonjourland* every time we are there.

## Lesson not learned

The change will be most challenging for Victoria. We have been visiting Nîmes for the past five years, staying in our small holiday cottage. Although she knows quite a few people and feels quite at home in the city, it is not the same as going to school and doing homework.

A French teacher who had worked at the Lycée in Zurich was recommended to me, and so Victoria started going every Wednesday for a two-hour lesson at his home. From personal experience, I know that the French schooling system is very different from the Swiss system, and he gave her the initial eye-opener she needed – lots of repetition, copying and memorisation.

At her age, she will be starting *collège* (secondary school equivalent) and he talked about the differences that she will encounter in the way the children approach their school life. But after several months I felt that the lessons were not really benefiting her as much as I had hoped. She had only just started learning French in her Swiss primary school and her level was extremely basic. Although the private tutor spoke almost entirely French, which was good, there was something missing. Most of what he was trying to teach her was going completely over her head.

"How can I talk in the *passé composé* when I don't even know what that means!" she wailed, after yet another woeful Wednesday. I was despondent. The lessons were expensive, but it wasn't the money, it was the fact that she wasn't improving and hated going. Her confidence hit rock bottom and she started to become negative about the move.

## Finding means in Nîmes

At the end of last year we visited Nîmes and the head teacher of the primary school invited Victoria to spend two weeks with the class. This gave her something to look forward to; she will participate every day for the two weeks. It is an *école privée*, and has children in *maternelle* from three years old, up to *lycée* where they do the *baccalauréat* at about 17 years old. French private schools are a fraction of the cost of private Swiss, international or British schools, but one of the main benefits is they are more supportive of non-French-speaking children and they don't go on strike (as much).

Still, the Wednesday lessons were a problem. By now Victoria would be in tears on Tuesday evening, claiming imaginary illnesses or whatever excuse she could conjure up. She talked about how uncomfortable she felt being in his house, how his children were a major distraction, how he left her on her own to fill in worksheets for most of the lesson and, as the lesson was after lunch, he often nodded off at his computer.

I gave in. It was of no benefit, and negative experiences were in no way going to mentally prepare her or encourage her. Everyone complimented Victoria on how well she did in her language-learning; she is bilingual in English and German, but I still wanted her to be more prepared than she was in her spoken French.

## Psyched for Skype

For several weeks I spent time going through basic vocabulary with her and she continues to watch French television every day. Then by chance, a contact in France introduced me to *Learn French at Home*. The company was set up by a French lady, Céline Anthonioz, who lives in Lausanne and has a team of French-native-speaking teachers. I was intrigued by what the company was offering and their language-learning methods, so I decided to sign Victoria up.

It was simple preparation; I enrolled her via their website and talked to Céline about our move and what I hoped Victoria would gain from the lessons. Each lesson is done via Skype with a webcam and the teacher writes and speaks on a one-to-one basis for the duration of the 45-minute lesson.

Victoria's teacher is a wonderful lady, she is sensitive and encouraging, and since Victoria started nine weeks ago her confidence is at an all-time high. She now looks forward to every Wednesday; she gets an immediate benefit by not only intensive



With their move to France approaching, Nicola was concerned about her eldest daughter learning French, so she signed her up for lessons via Skype, the messaging and video chat service



listening and speaking but also seeing the language written on the computer in front of her. She is totally relaxed, and like most 12 year olds, is very comfortable with the computer and the 45-minute lesson passes by in a flash.

Although my French is reasonable (except when I try and make myself understood at the local town hall) my daughter is now hinting that I should also sign up. Given that they teach adults and children from all over the world, I might prepare myself as well. With only four months to go before the removal men arrive, I am much happier now that Victoria has had these successful French language lessons to prepare her as much as possible. She will still have to cope with the initial culture shock in her first few months at her new school but the motto 'be prepared' has certainly helped so far. □

Nicola Christinger-Grant is an English teacher, writer and author of the children's book *'The Fish with a Wish: and other stories'*. For information about *Learn French at Home* visit [www.learnfrenchathome.com](http://www.learnfrenchathome.com)