

Navigating a Bilingual World: The Journey of a Native English Speaker Teaching in France

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ABSTRACT

This paper began as a talk to colleagues and fellow educators about my experiences teaching English in Paris. I moved from the UK to Paris in 2020 with no knowledge of the French language and began teaching four-to-six-year-olds before moving up to middle school children. The following account focusses on my professional development as an English teacher and my experiences adapting to French life, French culture and the French education system.

Keywords: English, language, learning, classroom, anglophone

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1 PART 1 CROSSING THE CHANNEL

1.1 How I transitioned from teaching English to native speakers to teaching English to bilingual speakers.

I am a native English speaker who learned German and Spanish in secondary school, as many students my age in the UK did. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to learn French (as many *other* students my age did), which would have been very useful given my later move to France. At no point have I lived in Germany (I had five years of German lessons) nor have I lived in Spain! As a result of my lack of formal French training, my move to France, a few years ago was made all the more challenging. But let's back up: In 1998, I moved from England to Wales and eventually began learning Welsh. In 2007 I trained as an upper primary school teacher (which is years 3 to 6 in the UK and CE1 to CM2 in France). In 2008, I qualified as a teacher and began teaching in Swansea, Wales, which I did for many years in several schools in the area, teaching primarily 8- to 11-year-olds. In 2016, I was made redundant, and I moved to England where I worked at a school in Bristol and became a member of the leadership team and the coordinator of mathematics. During this time, I taught 5 lessons of English literature and language per week, so five hours per week of literacy and then we would have additional grammar, punctuation and spelling lessons as well as additional English objectives covered in non-core subjects. This would mean that our geography, history, science lessons, etc., would also include English objectives and English-based tasks. While working in Swansea I taught one hour of explicit Welsh per week as well as what we call "incidental Welsh" which involved daily routines conducted in the medium of Welsh. For example, we would do our greetings, daily register, parts of assembly and countdowns in Welsh: "Bore da, pawb!" ("Good morning, everyone!").

My partner and I arrived in Paris in December 2020 just two days before Brexit, after she secured a PhD programme at the Sorbonne. As you can imagine, this was a particularly stressful time made worse by the fact that COVID was raging and also because France had shut its borders to British imports and lorries were queued up all along the motorways towards Dover. Despite the border control worker looking at us like we were crazy wishing to move to France at this moment in history, we did eventually make it across the border in no small part due to the fact that I had secured a job teaching at Collège Sévigné, Paris and had the documentation to prove it! In January 2021, I began teaching 'Ecole Maternelle' just six days after Brexit and my feet having barely touched the ground. Here, I taught both Moyenne Section (4-5-year-olds) and Grande Section (5-6-year-olds) which involved the students learning purely in the medium of English for half of the day (my job) and half the day purely in French (another teacher's job).

When Giulia Puma (Directrice du département d'enseignement supérieur, Collège Sévigné, Paris) asked me what my strategies were for teaching English to French speaking children aged 4 to 6 years, my first answer was that I had no strategies and no alternative other than to speak English to them! As a result, the children would use semiotic objects around the classroom to help express themselves as well as the little English that they did know. The children had been thrown into a new situation and had gone from being taught by a teacher who understood everything they said to one who understood nothing they said!

During this time, I worked in partnership (a "binôme" in French) with the children's French language teacher. Fortunately, she speaks particularly good English and was able to help me learn the

expectations for the students and develop some collaborative activities in both languages. It was essential that the learning environment I created was non-threatening, and that the children felt comfortable making mistakes and trying to use what English they did know to communicate. Hopefully them seeing me make mistakes with my French aided this. I remember one afternoon in February when I became a laughingstock for twenty-four five-year-olds when I attempted to say, “crêpe”. They all fell about laughing and proceeded to imitate my attempt! I also taught phonics to the children via a British learning programme which teaches the forty-four phonics sounds in the English language using images and examples that are easy for children to learn. When teaching mathematics, I used the knowledge I had learned in the UK that employs conceptual methods, which is less reliant on language and involves visual and kinaesthetic manipulatives. By the end of the year, I was more comfortable in this environment and felt that the children had made real progress, not just with their ability to communicate with me but also their ability to communicate with each other and to understand and respond to instructions.

2 PART 2: GROWING UP

2.1 Joining college and learning how to teach LVA/ESL.

As my position in the Maternelle was only a maternity cover, I began looking for new jobs several months before it ended. Once again Sévigné came to my rescue and offered me a position teaching in their middle school, so in September 2021, I began teaching Science to our bilingual students and PE to our non-bilingual students. Teaching science was exciting for me as it is a genuine passion of mine, and I found the subject matter fascinating. I quickly discovered that there was a wide range of English language ability within the bilingual section but that I was essentially able to teach much how I would in the UK. There was a greater focus on vocabulary learning but the transparency of scientific language and the structure of its methodology helped greatly. I employed scaffolding such as sentence starters for those who needed it but, again, this was much like I would have done in the UK.

The sport side of things was quite different! I had a huge shock during my first lesson, where I was expected to teach a warm-up activity to our new 6ème (year 7) non-bilingual students. I gave the instructions very slowly and clearly, made gestures, gave a demonstration and then, upon blowing my whistle, all the students stood stock still and stared at me, without a clue as to what they needed to do. Lesson learnt, Mr Court! Things did improve and I quickly realised that a sports environment could be greatly beneficial to language learning as what is learnt becomes immediately purposeful and kinaesthetic – less abstract. It is an ideal situation to learn body parts, imperative verbs, modal verbs, numbers, time, etc. There are limitations, however, as at times it was difficult to ensure that all new vocabulary was of value: I am not sure how much my students will need to use the word “shuttlecock” in their future lives! It was around this time that I began to realise just how often anglophones talk in idioms. This was a big moment for me and transformed the way I speak in a non-bilingual setting.

In September 2022, my colleague Mark Wallace (Académie de Paris, English teacher) gave me the opportunity to work on an English language learning book for Editions Didier called *Level Up* (Wallace et al 2023²). Here, everything changed. I learned from Mark how to become an effective

² Wallace, M.; Court, M.; Coghlan, A. (2023). *Level Up*. Editions Didier. [co-authored book]

English language teacher who could combine authentic stimuli with relevant research to provide meaningful grammar and vocabulary learning. The essence was that by using authentic anglophone documents (videos, podcasts, social media posts, book extracts, song lyrics etc), students can be exposed to realistic and culturally meaningful source material. If the documents are well-chosen then a useful lexical field of vocabulary and a relevant grammar point can be identified and taught. We used Stephen Krashen's +1 "Input Hypothesis" (Krashen, 1985, as cited in Horwitz, 2013, p. 25³) (to ensure that the content was not too challenging) alongside Merrill Swain's "Output Hypothesis" (Swain, 1985, as cited in Horwitz, 2013, p. 26⁴) so the students have opportunities to be productive and creative with what they have learnt. When combined with social theories relating to the non-threatening environment that I mentioned earlier and an element of choice for learners, you have a meaningful way to teach new vocabulary, grammar and culture to English language learners and I desperately wanted to utilise this new knowledge in the classroom.

3 PART 3: VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE

3.1 How my strategies have developed and inform the way I now teach or how does a year 7 student who speaks no English become an effective English communicator by the end of middle school?

In September 2023, I got my wish, when I was asked to teach English as a second language alongside an English literature class for 4^{ème} bilingual students. For the ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, I was able to use and adapt all that I had learnt working on the book, while ensuring that any idiomatic language I used was specifically taught and not uttered in a casual and confusing way. For the younger learners especially, it was essential that I spoke as literally as possible, which was very difficult at first and not natural at all for me.

Generally, I combine resources that I create with those from the excellent textbooks that are now available, for example *New E for English 6e* (Cursat et al, 2021⁵) and *Shine Bright 5e* (Caumartin et al, 2024⁶), to cover the expected vocabulary, grammar and themes in the French (English language) curriculum. I also incorporate the AfL (Assessment for Learning) that I developed in the UK to inform what I teach next, which students need additional support and at what speed I take the students through the curriculum. I also give whole-class feedback after major tasks or assessments: I outline key misconceptions and give follow-up tasks, highlight grammatical errors, and give "Shout Outs" that celebrate specific successes of certain students.

³ Kolker Horwitz, E. (2013). *Becoming a Language Teacher*. Pearson. [authored book]

Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. Longman. [genre: authored book]

⁴Swain, M.(1985). Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in Its Development. In S. M. Gass & C. G. Madden (Eds.), *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Newbury House. [genre: book chapter]

⁵ Cursat, L.; Guill, A.; Gouyette, P.; Rosenberger, S.; Létant, C.; Letellier, K.; Wallace, M. (2021) *New E for English 6e*. Editions Didier [genre: co-authored book]

⁶Caumartin, A.; Escales, C.; Gommez Despres, S.; Moore, P.; Morand, H.; Newman, E.; Toneatti, O. (2024) *Shine Bright 5e*. Nathan [co-authored book]

My bilingual literature classes are vastly different. We study a range of novels, poetry and non-fiction texts. The input level is often above +1 because the students have a larger bank of semantic and cultural knowledge that they can draw on. Unfamiliar vocabulary is identified but not taught as part of a lexical field and there is much less of an emphasis on grammar, punctuation and spelling. However, this is a key aspect of my assessment for learning especially with such a diverse group of students who have been exposed to such varying degrees of English language acquisition and learning. The emphasis, though, is towards identifying themes, literary devices, the author's message and building a thesis statement that is supported by relevant quotes, which are then commented on to construct an analytical argument.

Collège Sévigné is a unique school and has two distinct programmes (<https://www.collegesevigne.org/>): bilingual and non-bilingual, but these two lanes are diverging. Firstly, the students are being increasingly mixed for many of their classes and, secondly, there are opportunities for non-bilingual students to move to the bilingual section. This raises some pedagogical questions: How do we make this transition a smooth one if students are going from an English language learning environment to a distinctly different literature environment? Should a typical lesson in each of these modes be so different or is there a more unified approach that could be employed? Should we introduce literature analysis into the language learning classroom and, if so, when?

Many of these questions landed on my shoulders (idiom alert!) because I am the coordinator of what we call the 'Anglais+' English language programme for year 7 to 10 students. They are difficult questions to answer because the ethos of the school is to create opportunities for non-bilingual students to eventually access a bilingual English literature curriculum, but it is also important those students have all of the practical language tools they need to function in an anglophone society. Currently, we begin looking at novels in year 8 (with a language focus), this increases in year 9 with the use of a UK English literature programme, which continues into year 10. It is vital that we have an effective curriculum progression document that clearly outlines the building of grammar and vocabulary and the introduction of literary analysis all of which is rooted in key themes and is of authentic cultural significance.

We, and our students, are very lucky. The 'Anglais+' students benefit from small class sizes, which enables them to verbalise their learnt English to a greater degree than they might do otherwise. They have one native and one non-native teacher who alternate every term. These teachers can easily focus on students who need extra support because the classes are small. We use interesting and exciting themes, contexts and stimuli, and incorporate game-based learning, to ensure the children are motivated. We celebrate cultural events such as Halloween and provide opportunities for our students to visit anglophone countries such as Ireland, the USA and England.

4 PART 4: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

4.1 Utilising AI in the Language Learning Classroom

I couldn't really finish this article without mentioning artificial intelligence, could I? Like many others, I was scared by it at first: will it make teachers obsolete? Will we have to destroy our internet routers every time we want our students to write an essay without cheating? These are valid concerns

and, as a school, we are giving fewer written assignments to do at home. However, I am beginning to realise its potential and am already benefitting from its capabilities.

As a teacher, it can be an incredible time-saver. The ability to create rubrics, sample texts, adapted texts and questions appears limitless, but it is important that you don't use it blindly. 80/20 seems to be the recommended amount of AI input vs teacher input. In short, check everything it creates and use it only to do something that you yourself can already do but would like to not spend so much time doing.

In terms of benefits for our students, there are many and it has become patently apparent that they will need to be AI literate in order to function successfully in the very near future. So, how do we teach them how to use AI as an effective learning tool and not a device to do their homework for them? Firstly, I believe that we must not demonise the technology and instead help students learn to use it effectively. This way, it does not become a taboo indulgence that is used in secret but rather a tool that can be used to enhance learning, provided the student knows how to approach it critically and with caution. Here are three ways I have utilised it in my English classrooms:

1. Text comparison. Imagine you want to teach the children the key features of a sonnet. Read and discuss one of Shakespeare's sonnets and then ask the students to instruct AI to create a sonnet. They can then decide if the AI has done a good job and investigate whether the generated sonnet contains all of the features that you would expect from an authentic sonnet.
2. Written description. With a group of second year English language learners (age 11- 12), we looked at Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970) and, using the basic structure, adapted it to write our own short stories. Next, was a focus on character description and the introduction of similes. Once the students had described their characters, they could paste their descriptions into an AI image generator and see if they are happy with the image created. If not, they would need to create a more detailed and specific description, thus improving their descriptive writing.
3. Instant feedback. With any class size, it is impossible to give the students as much time and feedback as you would like. With applications such as 'Class Companion' you can now set assignments, design grading criteria and have students write directly into an app that will not only assess the work they have done but give suggestions as to how they can improve.

All of these ideas, and others like them, should be tested first by the teacher and not relied on to be accurate and precise. As teachers, we need to become more AI literate so we can give input to the AI generators that is detailed and precise enough to create a result that is useable and beneficial for the classroom. We also need to be very wary of internet bias and ensure that what we create is not perpetuating racial, cultural or gender stereotypes.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I do not claim to be the authority on any of the subjects discussed in this paper, but I have had experiences that have been greatly beneficial and shaped my teaching. If anything I have learned can be beneficial to another teacher then that would make me very happy. Remember the year 7 class that didn't understand my instructions in the first PE lesson I taught? Well, I currently teach them English and three years later they are writing newspaper reports about the US election, using the present

perfect tense and the passive voice and can debate very forcefully with each other in English on a range of subjects. Not bad!

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