

Stage de Nouméa



By Marty Hantz, Principal at Taradale Primary School

A bit about myself...

I am currently principal of Taradale Primary School and have been here since 2010. TPS is a U5 Decile 9 contributing school with a current roll of 470 learners. I have been teaching for 28 years and have been a principal since 1999. I like to be hands-on as a principal as it is vital, in my opinion, to walk the walk when it comes to pedagogy and allows me to really get to know our learners inside out. As part of this I teach French to a selected group of twenty Year 6 learners for a full year as well as having French for Years 5 and 6 learners, as part of an electives programme – three sets of five weeks. My aim is to have a group of learners who will continue through to our local intermediate and then on to whichever high school they choose. I have a particular interest in the impact that a second language will have on our Maori learners.

Why did I apply for the Stage de Noumea programme?

The reason I wanted such an experience was the way that TPDL rekindled a real passion for learning French as a language. When you are teaching Year 6 you don't need to know a heck of a lot however through TPDL I realised that I was short-changing them and myself. The opportunity to be immersed in that second language was something I sought and certainly appreciated. Knowing that I had been selected meant I had to work hard and fast to try to get up to a reasonable level of language. Passing DELF A1 was a good starting point but I learned that I needed to listen and respond to French at a much higher level. Immersion tends to do that!

What did the programme involve?

A lot of organisation by those who took us there! The Stage was a real balance of French language study at University, visiting New Caledonian schools and being exposed to the local cultures. It was very full on but extremely rewarding. There was enough 'down-time' and, as a group, we used this time to meet often.

A huge part of the programme was the immersion itself, which was greatly helped by being billeted in local families who, very generously, housed and fed us, and generally taxied us around all over the island. For most of us that meant petit déjeuner a matin, and dinner were very important times – full of traditional meals, good wine and plenty of conversation.

We also had to deliver a ten minute presentation on our last full university day, based on aspects of the Stage, with a focus on the culture. This was daunting for all but resulted in high quality information and shared experiences. Oh, and did I mention that the presentations had to be en français?

What was the biggest highlight/benefit of the programme for me?

There are many highlights for me. I was eager to push my own personal boundaries and learn as many relevant phrases as possible. A real benefit was conversing with as many locals as I could while there. While they are always keen to practise their English they also showed great patience with my ever improving French. The benefit of that is the gaining of personal confidence and picking up on those formulaic phrases....though a couple from the rugby fields didn't tend to translate well!

On a more professional note, the real highlight for me was having that 'aha' moment towards the end of the Stage where I suddenly realised that I was understanding most of what I was listening to instead of grasping at one or two words in a sentence but still finding myself two sentences behind.....not a great way to have a conversation! That was followed through by waking up at night, on my return, with the knowledge that I had been dreaming in French rather than English.

How did the programme support my professional development in French?

Firstly through the gaining of new language, gaining of confidence and being able to string more and more French together. As those who teach languages know, the more we talk in the L2 the more our learners pick up and the less often they speak English. It was also interesting that despite the fact that the Nouvelle Calédonie education system is vastly different to our own, we could still pick up lots of neat little ideas to bring home to enrich our classrooms.

One aspect that took me a little by surprise was the realisation that I was in a situation similar to all of the ESOL learners at school. If I thought I had empathy for ESOL learners before the Stage then it has been doubled now.

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How did I develop professionally through the programme?

The Stage made me realise just how important it is that I master French. Because of this when we returned I changed the way that I learn French – going from attendance at the local Alliance Française to organising private tuition. The Stage was the kick-start of that decision.

The Stage also allowed me to form new acquaintances with other schools. While one off these hasn't quite turned out as expected as the initial keenness to create pen-pals kind of dissipated (from the Pacific end, not the Taradale end), I am negotiating with another school to foster a new contact.

What ideas did I pick up that I will take back to the language classroom?

Lots of ideas from the Stage itself but many more through discussion with those 'kiwis' on the Stage. For me, it was less about those ideas and more about actual resources that I found, purchased or 'borrowed'. I brought home with me 40+ picture books, and a couple of kids chapter books, alongside everyday items we tend to throw out or discard as useless – advertising features, newspapers and pamphlets from different businesses. All of these have so many uses! Some of the comic style books I bought have been cut up and used as part of a task-board. The learners love these as they have been laminated so they can draw or write all over them, and they are a great way for them to read and begin to understand basic instructions. Helps too if they work in pairs. Some of the comics have plenty of BD in them which are also great in so many ways....reading for understanding, filling in blanked out speech bubbles or using the picture and word cues to correctly re-order a cut up sequence.

What are my long-term goals in language teaching/learning?

I started the TPD paper in 2015 as I wanted to use that as a catalyst to commence my Masters. From that I then began to learn French seriously which, in turn, necessitated applying for a Stage de Noumea. Due to strong professional relationships between myself and the principals from Taradale Intermediate and Taradale High School, we have started our own little COL focused on French and Mandarin. From the French perspective this has been greatly helped by the French teacher at THS, Karen Stockill, who was also on the Stage de Noumea. Our aim is to ensure that French is a thriving language in the Taradale community through our collaboration.

From a school-wide perspective I intend to really strengthen the programme I deliver and work closely with Karen to build those learning relationships across our three schools. At TPS, the big push for me is to try to see if my theory that our Maori learners will gain a great deal from learning French and, essentially, encourage them to continue to be engaged learners.

Personally, I want to pass the DELF A2 exam this year and B1 next year and so on. I will be thinking pretty hard about applying for an AFS scholarship to France in 2017.

Would I recommend this programme to other language teachers?

Absolutely! It gives a great context to the language you choose, allows for stronger cultural knowledge and, the biggest of all benefits, it allows you to make or create new contacts. The experiences, should you choose to make the most of your trip, adds to that.

Any advice for future programme participants?

Don't pretend to get out of your comfort zone, you need to really get out of your comfort zone. Get out and about as often as you can, talk to the locals and get involved. I ended up in Catholic church services (I am neither Catholic nor religious), teaching local armed forces the cultural importance of a tot of rum in your morning coffee at the Anzac Dawn Parade and replied to a local Kanak 'powhiri' in Te Reo Maori. If you have a hobby or sporting activity then make contacts with the New Caledonians as you may end up using your skills to meet more people. I refereed a couple of games of rugby in French.

Other information I would like to share...

It is definitely not a holiday as there was a great deal of work and learning to be done. I am sure that this is easier if your French is strong however you do have to be organised as well as sociable! The locals are a great bunch and, like most of the world, seem to like us 'kiwis'. The fact that we aren't scared of trying to assimilate is of great benefit to their perception of us.

Lastly, don't be afraid of the snakes!