

Exchange experience – a year at a school in Fance

Article by a Year 12 student with Canberra Academy of Languages
July 2023

I am from Canberra and I am currently in year 11. For the last ten months, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to experience a cultural exchange in France. My placement was in a small town called Epernay, located to the east of Paris in the Champagne region. Here, I stayed with a local host family, attended a local school, and learnt traditional customs of French culture. Experiencing everyday life in another country is incredibly enriching and valuable, and allowed me to have a more accepting attitude towards different cultures.

Participating in a new school system, trying new foods, changing lifestyle needs to fit in with others, and learning about history and values of a new place were some of the main things I took away from my time there. Asides a multitude of benefits on a personal and global level, for me, it was also an incredible opportunity to develop my language skills.

I have been learning French since I was three years old, and have been fortunate to have had a variety of language teachers who have supported me, encouraged me, and allowed me to participate in life changing events such as this one. Being able to communicate with an entire new community of people pushed me to recognise the astounding effects of language learning, and how this impacts interaction, the sharing of ideas, and importantly, the sharing of cultures.

It was the little achievements and funny situations that brought the most joy to language learning. Things like having my first dream in French, and the thrill it made me feel. Or being able to participate in 'normal' activities, but in another language. Like playing soccer! I definitely learnt a lot of sports vocabulary! Or going to the cinema and the theatre, and realising that I understood everything, that I could laugh at the jokes, and that I didn't feel the usual exhaustion that comes from translating in your head.

I was able to recognise my mistakes, and laugh at them. Like the time that my host Mum was describing a friend's fear of mice (souris) and I understood that she had a fear of smiles (sourire)! It is these moments that allowed me to recognise the power of immersion, and how language learning changes how you perceive the world. It also provides so many opportunities that would otherwise be incredibly limited.

I was lucky enough to take part in and pass the French Bacallaureate along with my peers, which was a very proud achievement, and one that demonstrated to me how far I have come. I hope that we will continue to have access to the resources needed for language learning, so that we are all able to become more accepting, more knowledgeable, and more connected.

