

An Incredible Journey: Becoming a Language Assistant in Quebec

Edward Bugler

University of Portsmouth

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to highlight the many possibilities and opportunities that open up through language learning, using my experience as reference. Firstly, I expand on my various motivations for language learning from a young age up to where I am today. Secondly, I describe my first few days of moving to Quebec, Canada, for my placement year abroad. Lastly I outline the ways in which my year abroad has impacted on me as a person and on what I see are the potential benefits of language learning more generally.

Keywords:

Quebec; British Council; Language Assistants; motivation; benefits of language learning

A little about me

I am a final year undergraduate at the University of Portsmouth reading *International Relations and Languages*. Throughout 2016-2017, I worked as a British Council language assistant in Quebec, Canada. That year was a compulsory part of my undergraduate degree. The placement was paid and set in the exquisitely beautiful Quebec City. Since completing my year abroad and getting involved with the language learning development programs, many exciting things have happened: I was asked to be a guest speaker at the London Language Show symposium; I regularly give presentations and do guest speaking at local schools on the importance of learning languages; I have become a British Council Language Assistant Ambassador and I have been offered several jobs around the world, and especially in China, to teach English.

What turned me on to language learning?

My first memory for wanting to learn languages came at the age of around 12 when my best friend and I realised we could have secret conversations, perhaps about teachers or classmates we disliked. As the story goes, we first tried to learn Elvish after obsessing over the Lord of the Rings trilogy. We discovered relatively quickly that this was going to be far too difficult. We instead decided to learn a language that had perhaps a bit of a better grounding and one that we could both get support from other speakers, we chose French. Little aspects like that spark creativity in kids can be used to inspire kids today to take up languages - ideas that can invoke curiosity and imagination. At 12, I had no interest in planning my career which is so often used to invoke language learning for students. Being told about the professional benefits of learning languages had no effect

on me to want to take up languages. Instead I wanted to describe imaginary worlds I had invented, and I wanted to make a language or be able to understand the Simpsons when I went abroad. I think the small aspects of creativity and imagination among learning are a key tool that should be used to inspire younger generations to learn languages or, better still, intertwined with language learning.

My second memory of wanting to learn languages came at the time I was choosing GCSE subjects. Teachers were, at that point, thoroughly invoking ideas of career prospects and which subjects would be best suited to us - as individuals. I had no idea what I wanted to do in the future, I only knew that I suspected I would not have 'one' job for the rest of my life and I doubted I would stay in Britain indefinitely. With this, French seemed to be an indisputable option. To me, the opportunities that came with learning another language were unlike any other subject. Learning another language meant I was not confined to Britain, United States or other such English speaking countries. Learning French alone gave me the opportunity to confidently speak to 220 million more people, the ability to speak in 29 countries other countries including Canada (Quebec), Haiti, Madagascar and Switzerland. It has given me access to thousands more businesses opportunities and has made me appreciate the cultural significance of other countries and people.

My passion for learning languages took a turn as I finished my second year of University. My career interests were narrower at this point. I now knew I wanted to taper my studies to focus primarily on cultural relations and cultural policy in order to work as someone that promotes cross-culture opportunities for students and business. I have always enjoyed travelling, and you never quite fully appreciate the cultural heritage of an area nor integrate properly with a community without making an effort to speak to them in their mother tongue. To quote Nelson Mandela, "if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head; if you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart." I felt that if I could encourage more people to learn languages and appreciate foreign cultures, I would be doing my part for communities across Britain taking the leap towards life changing experiences.

From an early age, I had fascination for Canada and after starting university, it had been my goal to try to work towards a year in Quebec, Canada. The country had always inspired me and it was always somewhere I would have loved to visit. After some unsuccessful job applications I discovered the opportunity to become a British Council Language Assistant in Quebec. The programme is very competitive and I was overjoyed when I was accepted after a rigorous selection process. I realised that this was a unique opportunity which would allow me to develop language skills and gain invaluable work experience at the same time. I would also be able to explore the country during holiday period.

Quebec - the first few days

On the 26th of August 2016, it was time to leave the UK and head for 'la belle province'. I arrived in Montreal late after a long flight very jetlagged; I wasn't used to travelling for

such an extended period. Fortunately, our organisers had organised a pickup service to the hotel we (the newly appointed language assistants) were staying at in Montréal for the next few days, so I did not need to worry about any of this. I quickly learnt there was no one holding my hand through this experience though and I would need to quickly develop independence and efficiency (my first of many qualities I learnt or developed on my year abroad). Montreal YUL airport is enormous and somewhat daunting. I don't believe I had ever seen that amount of people in one place before. I remember walking into a huge hangar-like building full of people flying internationally. After walking off the plane, I joined a queue which looked as though it would take at least a full day to clear. Roughly two hours later I was ushered into a room with many more people for work permit acceptance. I had to wait another two hours there, at which point jet-lag severely hit and I was feeling very agitated. After what felt like another eternity, I was sent on my way with my stamped working visa to collect my luggage. I made my way to the shuttlebus and to the hotel. All went well, apart from the French perhaps! I somehow found my way through the endless floors of the airport and pickup points and stumbled upon my bus driver. Even through my tiredness, I had my eyes fixated at the lights and nightlife of Montreal city.

The next few days were meant to prepare us for our role as a language assistant and to prepare us for the expected inevitable culture shock (though this never happened to me). Whilst this was the goal, in reality, these days were spent exploring Montréal and making some incredible, lifelong friends. On the third and final day in Montréal, the time came for us all to go our separate ways around Quebec, some stayed in Montréal, others travelled west towards Ottawa and some were traveling by bus eight hours away to the very remote region of Gaspé! I fortunately hopped on the bus with most of the other assistants who were heading north towards Quebec City. This 'départ' was very emotional, for all of us. Despite the little amount of time that we had spent together, we had somehow managed to gel together as a group very quickly. I believe this could have been because we all had very similar interests and goals, made better by the fact we were all somewhere new, exciting and somewhere we had worked hard towards. Around eight of us got off at Quebec City. We all dismantled our luggage and waited for our mentors to collect us. Not long after, I was greeted by a lovely, bubbly lady with her daughter. She mentioned that she had been doing the programme for a while now and had enjoyed the assistantship program. We made our way to the accommodation I would be staying at for the year, what I would later call home.

My mentor took some time drive me around Quebec to show me a bit of the area, areas I would know like the back of my hand by the end of the year! More towards the end of the afternoon, my mentor drove me to my town and house I would be staying. I remember this particular moment very well. It is good to mention at this point, I did not know anything about my accommodation and where or who I was staying with as I had entrusted my mentor with this. As we drove into the village, I remember first seeing the big skiing mountain on my right. I had seen that there was a mountain close by and I was very excited to learn to snowboard from time to time. I had not realised how close it was to my house, I was able to ski to my house! We stopped directly opposite to the

entrance of the skiing mountain, we pulled into the drive to my house to be, to find around 6 - 8 cars parked outside and my mentor looking at me with a look that showed both fear and intrigue. I hopped out of the car and got my huge suitcases out, within a blink of an eye, everything I had brought with me from the UK including my 20kg suitcases were swiped from my hands by six young kids. I looked up to see a lady with a smile from ear to ear running towards me with arms open. I was now in the hands of the beautifully gentle, amazingly caring, incredibly crazy Laroche family. After spending five minutes or so with this family I had never met before I felt more at home than ever before. I entered the house to find around thirty people from the village to welcome me as the new language assistant. My host family had organised a big sushi night with lots of friends and family from the village where we would make our own sushi and eat them all together. I had never made sushi before so within hours of being in my village I was already learning a new cultural aspect that I could take with me into later life. Everyone I met that night was beautifully friendly, it was such a warming environment, and everyone was so interested in what I had to say, I honestly felt fully integrated in the community from my first step inside. From this night on, I was settled, I was in my element. I was around people that cared for me and for whom I cared in return. I was in an environment that was beautiful and a place that was constantly teaching me new, exciting things. I did not want it to ever end.

How did my stay in Quebec impact on me as a person?

Learning languages and taking that all important year abroad especially, is incredible and rewarding for so many different reasons. You improve and develop both personally and professionally. The obvious advantage of taking a year abroad in a foreign country with a foreign tongue is that it will improve your linguistic skills rapidly and dramatically. Before moving to Quebec, I had been learning French for at least 6 years. I was in no position to confidently say "I could speak French", however after my placement, I have never felt more confident in my French. Specific areas I have improved my French language dramatically are in the oral skills, listening skills and in my vocabulary, albeit with a Quebecois accent! Areas of my language that could possibly have had less influence are in the written skills because as you make more friends in that country, the more you talk to them using social medias/text, etc. This in turn, can often become abbreviated written language and/or 'slang' language. This can then have some impact on your writing skills in your foreign language. That said, with a little recap on written language especially after the year abroad, you can soon pick up what you should have learnt up to your point of taking a year abroad. With the obvious language benefit of my year abroad out of the way, I am now going to go onto the supplementary impacts that Quebec has had on me.

Firstly, I have become more confident than I ever imagined I would be at this age. Aside from gaining confidence in my non-native language, before taking my year abroad, I would do anything it took to save myself from presentations and performances in school and at University. Now, having completed my year abroad, I have been asked to speak to an audience of up to 300 at the Language Show in London where I was a guest

speaker at the 'Speak to the Future' symposium with the British Council. Before taking my year abroad, I wouldn't have even given thought to the idea of doing an event like this. I am incredibly proud of myself and the personal characteristics and traits. I feel as though I have developed to a stage now where I am confident in so many different areas, socially, professionally and personally. These are areas that I know wouldn't have developed to the extent they are now without pushing myself to learn languages and indulge myself in foreign cultures.

Secondly, when you are learning languages (especially when you get to the point of taking a year abroad), if you expect only to learn that language, you are very much mistaken. You learn a whole new culture and the many things that comes with that. To give some examples of the aspects of Canadian and Quebecois culture I personally learnt during my year, aside from learning French dramatically; I learnt to snowboard, I learnt to track moose, to play ice hockey, a new cuisine and even how to survive a 25km hike in a -40 degrees snowstorm. These are some things you simply cannot learn in most parts of England, nor, arguably in Europe! I have found, to fully appreciate these unique aspects of the foreign culture, one should make at least some attempt to speak the tongue. As mentioned before, when you speak to someone in their mother tongue, you speak to the heart.

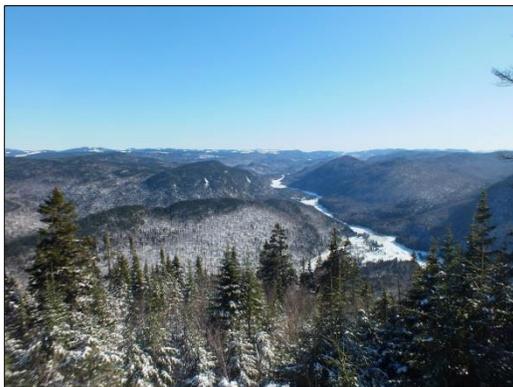
Thirdly, I feel more confident in my professional position. One, disputed 'beauty' of the French language (at least from what I found) is that it can be considered somewhat 'direct'. Meaning, Francophones (and this was evident in my experience of Quebec) say what they want and don't dabble around the lines. This is something that the English have stereotypically struggled with. I myself am no exception, I can think of several times where I have been overly polite and as a consequence, not got exactly what I have wanted from certain situations. Learning French and spending a year in a Francophone country has meant I can now incorporate this French attitude into my day to day life (where necessary!). I am less scared to ask for what I want and not to dabble around the end goal. This has meant I am confident in asking employers for job opening and applying for jobs that are perhaps a little overly ambitious. Furthermore, I feel more socially capable, I can approach conversations easier, I can hold a conversation better – be it with my best friends or with people that I barely know or do not know at all.

From my perspective, the greatest advantage of taking a year abroad was the contacts and friends that I made. I made so many great friends during my year abroad. In my (admittedly biased) view I was neighboured with the friendliest family in the world, and one that also happened to be ex-Olympic acrobatic skiers. This meant I could learn to snowboard with the youngest son (5 years old) who would teach me to snowboard consciously and at the same time, teach me French subconsciously. He had no recollection that my French was not as good as all other adults. I think he started to realise that I couldn't understand him so well when I wasn't doing the things that he was asking (I learnt quickly from this!). The whole experience was great. The family would also host parties and 'sushi nights' which meant I could network with the rest of the village and, from time to time, help them and their kids with English and teach them about British culture. I am, to this day, still in contact with all of my friends I have made

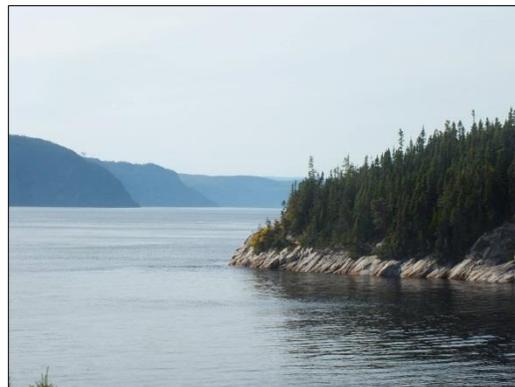
during my year abroad. I know, even now, a year on from the experience, that I could go back and have someone that would host me, someone who would transport me and someone to feed me. This friendliness of the people I met made a real lasting impression on me. It made me really appreciate their way of life and their kindness to people they hardly knew. This is one aspect of life that I have endorsed wholeheartedly. An aspect that I believe has made me a better person today.

A final thought

Language study is actually an interdisciplinary endeavour, one in which you can learn so much more about other subjects. Whether it is talking in French (or whichever language you are studying) about politics, business or science and technology as part of your A-level topics, or translating a text about plumbing into the target language as part of your university course, you gain a much better understanding about a vastly wider range of topics than when working towards a specialist degree. In other words, learning languages can give you the opportunity to learn about all kinds of other disciplines in life. In my view this is a brilliant aspect of language learning and an important point to pass on. Students who are not yet sure about what they want to do in the future should be encouraged wholeheartedly to learn languages because of this interdisciplinary aspect, and because, as I can assure them, having acquired language skills their career prospects will be improve in unexpected ways.



Atop 'Le Relais' ski mountain next to my school



Canadian lake



First days of autumn



End-of-year class photo

