

Meet the PANEL



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Every month we bring you expert advice on legal and financial matters as well as an indispensable guide to French daily life. We also put your questions to the experts; write in with your query about anything from land disputes to looking after your swimming pool or entertaining French-style. Send your questions to: letters@livingfrance.com

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FRANÇOISE DUFFELL teaches at Le Poiron Bonjour residential language courses

Family circle

Françoise Duffell answers a reader's query about what to look for in a residential language course for her and her family

Q I would like to arrange a language-learning holiday in France for myself, my husband and two children, aged 5 and 7. I have done some research and it looks like the most intensive method would be a residential course but there are lots available and it's hard to know what to look for. What sort of things should I be considering when choosing the course and what sort of preparation should we do as a family?

Mrs B Griffin

A As you know from your research there are indeed many methods available to improve your French. The huge range of books, CDs and classes are convenient and relatively easy to use. They have their place but a residential course that immerses you in the French language and culture provides one of the best foundations to language learning. Many people consider them to be the best way to significantly improve your French in a relatively short period of time. The exposure to French that a residential course provides will improve your basic language skills and probably most importantly, it will build your confidence. This seems to be one of the most important factors when learning a language.

When choosing your course, look for one that covers the needs of all your family. A course that has a good combination of teaching hours, activities and excursions would be a good choice for you. As your children are younger, they would benefit from a balance of tuition time and fun activities that reinforce the lessons of the classroom. If you capture their attention and keep them engaged, then learning French will be a pleasure for them.

Look for a course that provides separate tuition for adults and children. This type of course would be most suitable for you as it is likely your children are a different level from yourselves and also children learn in a different way from adults. Also, it's a good idea to look for a course that arranges for your children to spend time with French children of a similar age

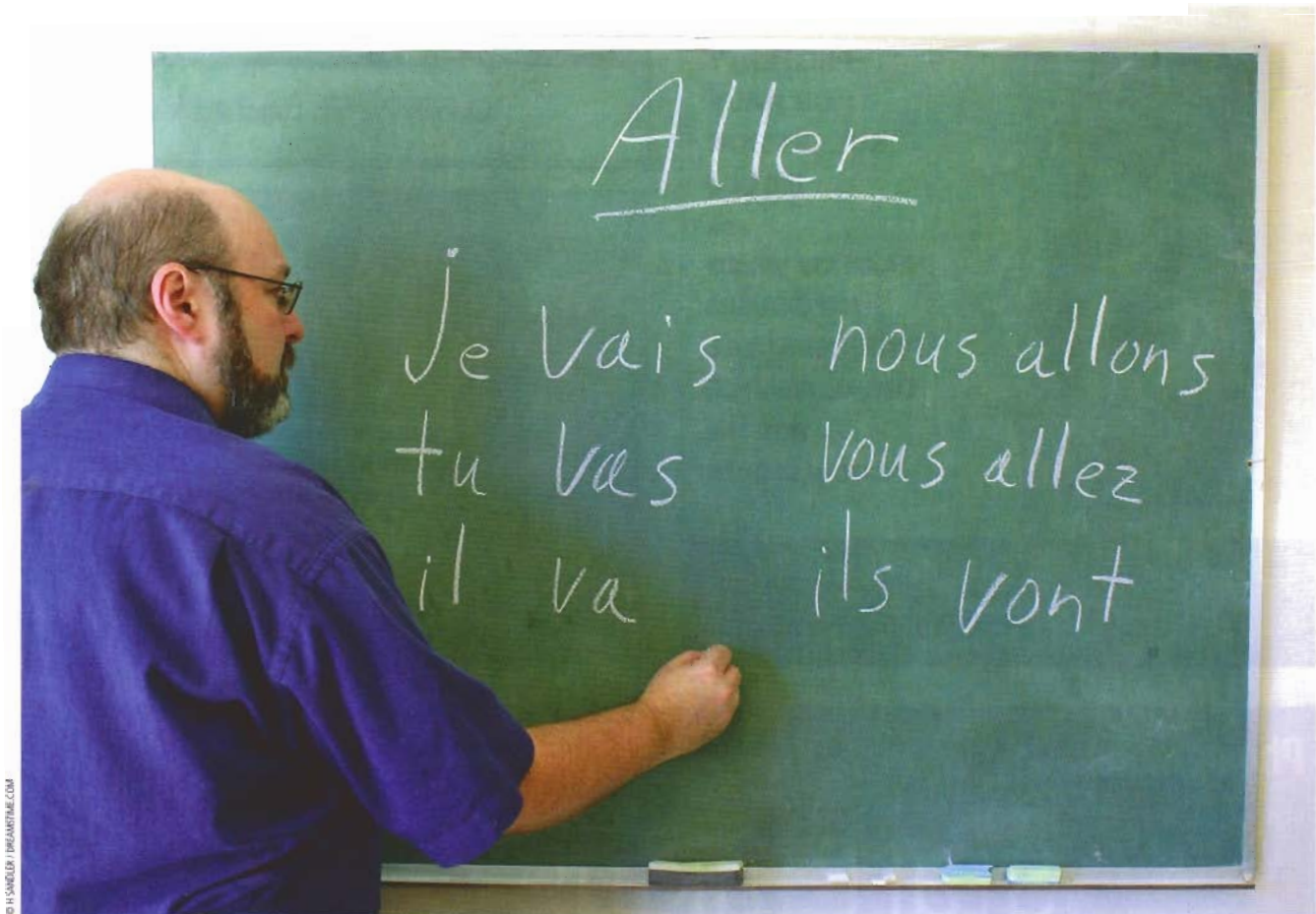
who have little or no English.

Children have an extraordinary ability to absorb information and generally do not suffer with the inhibition and self-consciousness that we do as adults so this type of exposure can be helpful for your children. The other point to consider is the benefit of having separate tuition for you as parents. If you are not in the same class as your children, the natural instinct as a parent to protect and assist them is not an issue. You will have your own time and space to learn, in a way that suits you, without worrying about your children.

If you decide on a course where the family has separate tuition, make sure that your social time, activities and excursions are spent together. That way it will seem more like a holiday rather than a learning experience. The activities and excursions should be an opportunity for you all to listen, understand and speak French. For example, a visit to a local market is a great opportunity to fully absorb the language and culture.

“A residential course that immerses you in the French language and culture provides one of the best foundations to language learning”

With the wide range of courses available, I would advise you to look for a course that has an experienced native language teacher. You will be more likely to try and communicate with them in French and less likely to lapse into English, and who better to teach you their own language? They will be very keen for you to achieve good pronunciation and should give you tips to achieve this. If you feel confident in your pronunciation you are more likely to speak French and after all this is the purpose of the course.



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Accommodation will also be an important factor for you as a family. There are several options such as off-site accommodation or staying with a French family, for example. Alternatively you could choose a course that provides accommodation on site which logistically is a lot easier as there is no need for additional travelling. If you go for this option, ensure that your mealtimes and other social time will be spent together with your tutor as this will give you an additional opportunity to practise your French. The whole family will also be able to experience the etiquette of French mealtimes.

It's a great idea for the whole family to do some preparation before your course. This can be as simple as learning and practising polite expressions such as hello, goodbye, thank you and please. If you can learn some simple vocabulary, for example names of objects and counting up to 50, this will all be beneficial. A good course should give you the skills to put the words together and construct sentences. You wouldn't want to waste your time and money learning lists of vocabulary while you're actually on the course as this is better suited to individual

study. To become familiar with different sounds and pronunciation you can listen to French radio or watch French TV via the internet.

It is also a good idea to read up on the culture prior to your course. For example, when walking into the baker's to get your bread in the morning, French people acknowledge the others by saying *bonjour* as they enter. Most shops close between midday and 2pm as the lunch hour is very precious in France and then they will open after lunch until around 7.30pm. Having some knowledge of all these little cultural differences will make your course a more rewarding experience.

On a lighter note, it's only by being in the country that you will also be able to understand the nuances of the language. For example, if you pronounce '*beaucoup*' incorrectly it can have a completely different meaning!

Whatever you do, enjoy it, make it fun and don't let it become a chore.

Fact file

Le Poiron Bonjour www.france4life.co.uk