

I had a request from an English lady to help her fourteen year old son (David) with his French whilst he was over in France for the summer holidays. At the same time I was talking to a French lady at Oliver's school about teaching English. She mentioned that she had a fourteen year old daughter (Margot) who wanted to find English people to talk to. As you know I had French students through SILC (placement agency to place French pupils/students in English families to learn English) coming to stay all summer.

So I decided to invite David and Margot to the house every Wednesday morning throughout the summer. The two of them along with my SILC student (always a girl) and my daughter Megan spent the morning talking with each other. Megan would either be a French speaker when working with David or an English speaker when talking with the French girls.

Some of the morning was spent talking in a group about a common topic- David would speak in French and the girls would help/ correct him as appropriate and the girls would speak in English and David and Megan would help/ correct them. I was always there to help as well but after the initial nerves had passed they were quite happy to self and peer correct.

After a group session they split into pairs which were changed after about 15mins so that everybody had the opportunity to talk to each other on a one to one basis. I split my time between the two pairs helping to keep the conversation flowing and giving advice on pronunciation.

In my role as facilitator I provided the topic material in both languages, things like: keywords / open questions/ pictures/ scenes/ role play scenarios. I also provided white boards and pens which we used to explain things/ draw diagrams or go over important teaching points.

As homework each week the students were asked to prepare to talk for the next week. I then looked through their preparation work to help with any errors and used this again to go over important points. The topics they covered were school, hobbies and interests, family and holidays.

Learning to date

Two learning points that stood out straight away were:

1. The standard of spoken English appears to be better than the standard of spoken French despite David attending a very expensive private school in the UK!!! The level of French spoken by my very bright fourteen year old niece would also support this, she would not be able to speak as fluently as the French girls spoke English
2. It would be very difficult to find enough teenage English children living in the area to join a language café or TANDEM project as at this age they tend to be fluent in both languages (Megan really didn't gain any language skills from the exercise and if she did I would say that she picked up more tips about describing things in English! She enjoyed the social interaction but that wasn't the main aim of the sessions.) So in terms of sustainability I would run out of English speaking teenagers! Unless I only ran it in the holidays.

The other difficulty would be the endless source of material needed to stimulate conversation but I guess this would be covered by the material available from the METIKOS project. The other point that was interesting was that if left unsupervised they naturally drifted into the 'strongest' language within the group- French.

I really enjoyed our conversation classes and the students all said that it had really helped as speaking the foreign language is often the skill least practised at school. I think it also helped the students to gain an insight into the life of an English public school boy and he learnt quite a bit about school life in France. So to a certain extent there was a language and a cultural exchange.

The main disadvantage to this for me was that obviously the SILC student changed every two

weeks so we did have to redo the introductions every fortnight!