There are no translations available.

Summary – The story in short

Many of the participants in the research have been resident in France for a number of years, and have in the course of that time undertaken French lessons from various sources, without actually achieving much success due to the lack of conversational practice with native speakers. The model for the research had to consider rurality issues and how small diverse communities from across the Poitou Charente could be reached. The model included a workshop with a Craft Café group, part of the Friends of St Angeau Association, with mainly English speakers, uploading the questionnaire onto a face book page of a regional magazine and providing hard copy questionnaires through local social networks including the friendly Tourist Information Office in Mansle

Aims/Objectives - Why, Where?

The aim of the field research for the METIKOS project was to obtain the information required to identify the language needs of local immigrant communities and also identify what real barriers they faced in regard to learning and speaking French. The workshop with the Craft Club also explored how well they had integrated into their local community.

As a result of this discussion it was proposed that this questionnaire should also be sent out via the Facebook page linked to a local publication ‘The Living Magazine’, (the owner of which is Kathryn Dobson and as a result is now a registered stakeholder on the project), which targets the English speaking community and tourists to the area.

The local Tourist Information office is also a member of the stakeholder group and the office manager agreed to hand out hard copy questionnaires through the office and host a post box for completed returns. In addition hard copy and e mail questionnaires were shared amongst stakeholders to provide to their own contacts.

The Project - How, Who, When?

The workshop took place with the Craft Café at the association clubhouse, which is located in St Angeau (a small town in the Charente Poitou Regions of South West France) in March 2012 This Craft Café is held every Monday afternoon and successfully promotes a ‘drop in and chat’ environment on a regular basis for between 12- 25 attendees each week. The group at the Craft Club is mainly women with one male participant, who have been meeting regularly every Monday afternoon for nearly three years with the focus needlecraft activities, supported by regular demonstrations on a wide assortment of activities from quilting to making bird boxes. The group is very representative of the English speaking community in the region but it does have a small number of local French women who attend quite regularly. Lee Dickinson is the main organiser of this group and has built excellent relationships. They are a well bonded group and therefore able to discuss issues without the reservations that may arise out of not knowing

the interviewer. The objective of the workshop was to create an environment which would provide greater insight into the challenges and issues they felt they experienced in regard to social integration. Members were asked if they would participate in the questionnaire activity, and discussion was led by Lee Rolph-Dickinson to explore in more detail how participants felt about their lives in France and the reasons they chose to immigrate to France.

The questionnaire was uploaded onto the face book page of the Living Magasine in March through to April 2012 over a 4 week period. Hard copy and e mailed questionnaires were also completed and returned over this period. In total 15 questionnaires were completed at the workshop, 8 provided through the stakeholder group and 15 through the Living Magasine Facebook page.

Results/Evaluation

This research was successfully carried out and brought in excellent information from different age ranges, from young families, through to working people and mature groups so providing an

excellent cross section of information, with some surprising results, especially the numbers of young families in the area.

The results from this work are recorded in the field research report and attached as part of the evaluation process.

The results from this work showed that whilst there was a desire to speak and/or improve their French language speaking abilities, the main issue seemed to be that even when attending more formal learning the lack of opportunity to practice their language skills was minimal. The natural conservativeness, especially within the more mature groups held them back from making conversation with their French neighbours, shopkeepers and on occasions experience with Government departments, hospitals etc where they were obliged to speak French quite often ended up by leaving them feeling frustrated and on occasions threatened by the whole process.

The idea implemented to make use of a social network through a Facebook group proved to be an excellent suggestion as it captured unknown information on the large number of British families who had chosen to immigrate to France for a wide variety of reasons, not just through marriage and family links, but families who saw rural France as a safer and more child friendly place to raise their families. The need identified by this group is that although the opportunity to improve their French was provided through meeting French families as part of the normal school routines, the problem they were facing was how they could support their children's' in completing their homework and having greater knowledge of cultural aspects of the whole school environment.

There were a few people, of various ages, who had set up small businesses as part of their move to France and although in the main these were self employed activities, they identified that whilst they were exposed to conversational practice through their business activities, they felt they still needed to broaden and improve their spoken French, especially in relation to regularly used local colloquialism when selling and purchasing items. They also needed to understand the local business culture in order to maintain and improve their business.

In the main, most people had undertaken language training in the form of group lessons, learning from a CD or books and on a very limited basis one to one. Also, in most cases these lessons were delivered by a French speaking English person rather than a local French resident or teacher. Some participants did admit to using the internet on a rather ad hoc basis when

need required. Although there were a small number of French people in the audience for both the workshop and the on line questionnaire, it was also clear to see that local French people would like English people to speak more French. They recognised there were learning issues, especially for the more mature adults, and also stated that they would like to learn English as they were interested in their local British immigrants as well as having a keen interest in English culture.

The success of the research model adopted in Poitou Charente was a result of the multi-faceted approach adopted:

• identifying a well bonded group who participated in other activities who were willing to fully embrace the exercise led to an in depth debate on the subject that opened up not only other research opportunities but also identified people willing to participate further in both the Language Café and Tandem pilot projects

• The uploading of the questionnaire onto Facebook

• Using stakeholder social networks

Lessons Learnt

From this case study we learnt that research through informal groups which had a common bond, and Facebook group pages that focus geographically in the Charente provides an excellent base to gather information, review and feedback on the project and other subjects appertaining to social integration. We also learnt that the target group for this project was more widely spread in terms of geographical location and especially in terms of the diversity of the immigrant population

The research has confirmed that local residents feel that the English immigrants do not want to learn French, but are now beginning to realise that not all are able to develop conversational skills through existing provision or indeed have the confidence to join this more “formal” learning environment. It has also highlighted some unwillingness on the part of local residents to participate in language learning in more non formal ways on a voluntary basis to support non French speakers, as the belief is that while there are more formal classes being offered by local associations, then these should be used by those wishing to speak French. This will be a major barrier to be overcome.

Local associations tend to be divided into either mainly French speakers or English speakers and there is a lack of networking between them - which appears to be sometimes related to someone in each association being able to speak both languages fluently, and also to some degree a reluctance to ‘share’ or join together to underpin sustainability of the associations. This may be that this is a very economically poor region and people locally are not in a position to be involved in more activity than they are currently undertaking.

Influencing agenda

The research has shown how important it is that the project has this focus on informal and non formal language learning, to remove the barriers for non French speakers by ensuring language learning is not seen as learning in the formal sense, but provides an opportunity to enjoy a social experience and integrate more easily into their local community.

Sustainability

It would be reasonable to assume that this type of ‘activity’ café could have a sustainable future as a suitable environment for conversational practice between different immigrants and local host country speakers as there are no venue costs and the income derived from the entrance

fee is kept to a minimum in order to be accessible for people with very low incomes. There are also opportunities to raise funds through sale of the items created through local markets and fairs, which will produce both additional income and alternative opportunities to converse in the host country language. In most cases these are run on a voluntary basis and if necessary some small payments could be made to a host country person to lead the conversational activity that would surround the actual activity being carried out and how the work fits into the host country culture. It would be useful if the actual Craft Café which was to be used as a base for conversational language development could explore how this would work in the current model and establish some aims and objectives which might be agreed by all current members, and to produce guidelines for new members joining the group.

It could be that Craft Café members would progress from this model to a more dedicated model of learning such as TANDEM and/or registering for more formal lessons delivered by host country associations or organisations specialising in language development.