

TIMES EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT - Review

Published in TESS on 20 November, 2009 | By: Jean McLeish

CPD - Thrown in at the deep end

An immersion course in France won rave reviews from two Aberdeenshire primary teachers.

Perhaps the wonderful food and wine helped, or maybe it was the sunny location in the charming medieval town of Salignac in the Dordogne. But the magical combination gave Irene Reid and her colleague Sinead Partridge an unforgettable week of continuing professional development.

When the two women arrived in France for an immersion course in the language, they were squirming at the thought of making conversation with their hosts. But by the end of their week's stay, their inhibitions had been dispelled.

"It was one of my top experiences in teaching," says Mrs Reid, the newly retired headteacher of Torphins Primary.

"It was fantastic. It was one of the best experiences of my life," says P7 teacher Sinead Partridge, 29, who teaches French to primary pupils at the Aberdeenshire school.

The two women took part in one of the courses run by Edinburgh-based company Le Francais en Ecosse. "We were staying in chalets and the company organised activities in the morning, then we met for lunch. There were workshops in the afternoon looking at different vocabulary, games and songs. It was all activities that we could bring back to class," explains Miss Partridge. "It was total immersion, so even at lunchtime the teachers would be sitting round the table with us and getting us to speak in French all the time."

Teachers were divided into groups according to their ability and given help with grammar or particular areas they wanted to work on.

"It was a bit embarrassing to begin with, but by the end of the week you had much more confidence, even just in social situations with other professionals, because I had only been teaching for four or five years," she says.

Until the immersion course in 2007, her only experience of France had been on family camping holidays. Now pupils back home in Aberdeenshire are also benefiting from the trip, which was funded by the British Council.

"Now I try as much as I can to do total immersion. So when it's time for French, I only speak French, obviously in basic phrases. The children are confident and I think the games make it a bit more fun for them," says Miss Partridge.

They were so enthused by their visit that the two women enlisted on an Aberdeen University French class on their return, to maintain their conversational skills.

"It's one of these experiences that every person who teaches a modern language should do - have a total immersion in the language," says Mrs Reid, who is now working part-time at Aberdeen University on the B.Ed course.

"They were long days; we were working through until half past four in the afternoon and then we would go for dinner, and part of that was to encourage us to speak socially. It was hard work. It was by no means a holiday, but it certainly was similar to a holiday."

During the week, the organisers arranged outings to local places of interest, wine tastings and even a game of Petanque. "You were getting the culture and the food, which was typical of that region of France."

The two teachers snatched any spare moments to write on their blogs to keep colleagues and friends at home updated on their exploits.

"It was very intense and very much games-based, enjoyable learning. We had such fun learning, which I suppose was the secret of it all," says Mrs Reid.

"What we did then was take the children on an immersion course to Edinburgh with the same company. We paid for that and they had a whole day in French - games, exercises, singing and things like that.

"I cannot praise Richard Tallaron and his team highly enough. He is French, but he works in Scotland and the team goes over at Easter and summertime and they have a couple of resorts where you can do this course. Most of the team of teachers were French and they were just so able and motivating and supportive."