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My life in Paris, or: Two years in the merde



To start with, let me just get this one straight: I *do* like it here. Contrary to what the French word for ‘shit’ may make you think of, the title does not really convey the spirit of my existence in the city of lights; it’s just an allusion to Stephen Clarke’s hilarious account of his life in Paris, and a 2004 bestseller, *A Year in the Merde*. As it turns out, us foreigners can have strikingly similar impressions of the day-to-day practicalities of living in the French capital, whether we come from just across the Channel (which, sure enough, is not at all considered ‘English’ by the locals), or from slightly further away.

So, my second academic year at the Université de Paris 3 is now officially over. Unofficially, it’s been over since late April, when all the classes, and most of the marking, finished. What followed on was a series of final exams, which are usually sat by a relatively tiny minority of students. That is because students in France have a choice between two modes of assessment: ‘examen final’ (in which case they do not need to attend any classes during the year) and the more popular ‘contrôle continu’, where – as the name vaguely suggests – the attendance is compulsory, but the final exam is replaced by written and/or oral tests that are organised *within* class time. This, by the way, effectively reduces the second semester to just 10 weeks of regular teaching, which does not seem to be a source of concern for anybody, except possibly newcomers like me 2 years ago. In fact, a few months into my stay in Paris, I came to appreciate the *potential* possibility of having 10 weeks of regular classes, as two weeks after the summer semester began, French students decided to go on ...strike! What struck me the most about the whole event – apart from the remarkable efficiency of this form of protest as a means of forcing the French government into making concessions – was the fact that the striking students effectively turned into the housemasters, in a literal sense of the word: they seemed to be the keepers of the keys to all the classrooms (so that no meeting, or – God forbid! – a secret lecture could be held behind their backs) and they questioned each and every person wishing to enter the building (so as the presence of their less-favourably-disposed-towards-striking colleagues could not tempt teachers into resuming the teaching, I presume). The strike went on for a whole 6 weeks, which – coupled with the two-week Easter break that immediately followed – came up to almost 2 months of mid-semester holidays. Fully paid, as it turned out later. Including the payment for the overtime that I never did, but would have done if it hadn’t been for the strike.

Now, to go back to the very beginning of the last summer semester: I remember my excitement when I arrived at the university 5 minutes before my 8 am class began, and had to queue up in front of the huge notice board, alongside colleagues and students, to get a peek at the ‘*planning des salles*’ (yes, that’s the original wording in native French) – a necessary step if you wanted to know which classroom you were supposed to teach in on that particular day of the week. FYI: the crucial info was not available the day before, so I couldn’t have checked it in advance, and there wouldn’t have been much point in arriving much earlier than 7:55 am, in order to study the board thoroughly and peacefully. I’d learned it the hard way in the past, when I decided to play the early bird on a particularly dark and rainy winter morning (to give you a more complete picture of my misery, in France, between October and February, it doesn’t get light until 9 am!): totally uncharacteristically of a lastminute.com person like me, I arrived at my workplace shortly after 7:30 am, only to find closed doors, and a handful of students (who seemed surprised at my surprise at finding the door closed), patiently waiting for the gates to be officially opened a quarter of an hour later.

Just one more comment on 'le planning' service. Initially, I had a few problems with the equipment, for which I'd placed a standing order at the beginning of the semester, and which invariably failed to turn up in my classroom on certain days of the week. It took some time before I managed to explain to the technicians that – contrary to what common sense might have them believe – my classes are not all on Tuesday, so I need the CD player on Wednesdays, too (and this was not due to my confusion of le mardi and le mercredi). Having said that, I must state that once I sorted out the confusion, I was pleased to see how the system worked – the 'matériel' would arrive and leave the classroom with the help of the technicians, who were employed by the university precisely to do this: provide teachers with the CD players and TV sets and make sure that everything worked properly.

Whereas allocating classrooms in advance seemed to be a task impossible, my timetable for both (sic!) semesters was handed in at the beginning of July (sic! again). And in case you were interested – yes, French July *does* come two months ahead of September, when the classes actually began, and no, it didn't change one iota in the meantime, in spite of quite a bit of student group reshuffling between the semesters. Turns out, certain predictable things can be planned way in advance, after all, and by the end of my 4th semester in Paris, I'd forgotten why I initially thought it was so amazing.

Unfortunately, this sort of efficiency does not characterise the (in)famous 'administration française' in general. Before I received my first salary (at the end of October, having arrived two months earlier), I had to put a lot of effort into obtaining my 'autorisation de travail' and 'titre de séjour' (work and residence permits). This, in turn, didn't happen until I had produced quite an impressive stack of documents, including the list of any injections I'd had since I was born, as well as – to quote Stephen Clarke again – the marriage certificates of any hamsters I'd owned since 1995.

Now, to turn to more teaching-related matters: student groups in Paris can be big enough to make you feel like you're delivering a lecture. You frequently find yourself facing 36 people in a regular class, as opposed to 'just' 18 in the language lab. But I quickly discovered there is one thing worse than teaching a huge group of students; that is – teaching a small group of students. French students are late. I mean, *late* late. Like 25 minutes, for a one-hour course. There always seems to be a very good excuse, though – RER (suburban train) was on strike, RER was late, RER was *not* late, and that's why they only just missed it. And, since the group is small, they shake hands with everybody, giving them a short account of all the important events that happened since they last saw each other. So, there is something I never had a problem with back in Poland: discipline. Students talk. Among themselves, that is. But I forgive them. Most of them are really very nice, and are kind enough to look surprised when, a few weeks into the semester, they find out I'm not exactly a native speaker of English. Besides, how can you not forgive someone who calls you 'Madame'?

The difficulties the French experience while learning English phonetics are obviously quite different from ours. I knew quite a lot about it already when I arrived in Paris, having made friends with a group of French students years ago in Poznań, and having spent long hours speaking Eengleesh with them in 'Arry's puba' in Stary Rynek (for those who might wonder, that's their familiar name for 'Harry's Pub' – I wonder if it still exists?). So – ok, I knew that pronouncing /h/ would be a challenge for most of them, therefore their friendly 'ellos' did not really surprise me. But I did not realise they would all of a sudden exercise the ability to produce it – ... where they were not supposed to. I found it challenging to explain to my Parisian students that the famous novella by Ernest Hemingway is not exactly 'The Hold Man and the Sea', and 'the hearily bird catches the worm' is not the precise wording of an English proverb.

In terms of the structure of the course in phonetics itself, there is one major difference between Poznań and Paris: no division between the descriptive and the practical part, other

than that the first hour of the 120-minute block is devoted to theory, and the second hour to practice in the lab, where the students listen to a tape and do exercises, occasionally involving comprehension. They dispose of their own copy of the tape, which means they can work at their own pace (in most cases, over-optimistically fast), doing certain exercises over and over again, if need be. What is remarkable, and worth imitating, is that they record themselves while speaking to the microphone, which allows them to listen to their own pronunciation when they've finished, thus promoting and facilitating self-correction.

A second substantial difference between the two universities is the enormous amount of synchronisation between particular teachers at Paris 3 – which is, of course, both a blessing and a curse. First, the blessing: it totally removes the pressure about being creative and inventive. Gone the nagging suspicion that your brilliant colleague, Dr W., who is known to have come up with the most outstanding syllabus in the world, might be using materials that are way way more interesting than yours. In Paris, everybody is given a ready-made syllabus and a workbook, and even if you wanted to incorporate your own exercises (which is by no means forbidden), there would literally be no time for that. As a result, your only worry would be that Dr W. might be doing page 29, while you're stuck in exercise 3 on p. 27 of the same 'brochure'. Now, about the curse: you can't really afford to miss a class, without finding replacement. The group is divided into two demi-groups, each of which has a lab session on alternate weeks, where they listen to one tape at a time, while the other half is having conversation. To be more precise, they are further subdivided into 2 quarters, so as a result, the conversation class never has more than 9 participants. It is taught by a 'lecteur' (or 'lectrice'), who is always a native speaker of English, not much older than the students themselves, and recruited from among numerous French graduates in their countries of origin, willing to spend 1 or 2 years in France to brush up their French, enjoy the country, and be paid for it. Anyway, if you miss one class, then you're out of line with other teachers, as one of the demi-groups has missed out on one of the tapes, and there's no way you could make up for it by the end of the semester. Things were a bit less stressful, in this respect, back in Poznań, where even if you chose not to turn up for a class for some unconvincing reason, you knew you would somehow catch up, by skipping certain less important bits, or spending 18 minutes, instead of 180, discussing intonation (oh, thank God for that:-)!). Now, to my past, present and future employers: throughout my 13-year-long teaching career, I haven't exploited this possibility even once! But it was sort of comforting to know that I *could* do it if I really had to...

And finally, there's the huge difference in terms of the underlying assumption regarding the objectives of teaching phonetics, which is well reflected in the contents of the course itself. In a nutshell: students should know how English words (and sentences) are structured, i.e. which phonemes go in which words, and which syllables carry stress in words and sentences, but not so much how the particular sounds are pronounced, in fact. Well, in the second year, all the vowels plus diphthongs are treated within 25 one lab unit, and any comparisons to French sounds is really an extra, not arranged for by the workbook. Consequently, the first – descriptive – part of each class is devoted to the presentation of rules, and the second to their application. Things like the vocal tract and places & manners of articulation are usually mentioned in passing, which lasts no longer than 10 minutes, unless you're prepared to be way behind the hypothetical Dr W.

This system, again, has its advantages and disadvantages. The latter are probably self-explanatory. As for advantages – if the students master the rules indeed, in their English-speaking future they may be far better prepared to deal with unknown words than their counterparts from Poznań are. At this point, I have a confession to make: I learned quite a few things myself. Not so much that certain individual words were pronounced in a particular way (although some surprises were in store for me here, too: was it obvious to everyone but me

that the adjectives ‘spiritual’ and ‘alternate’ are stressed on the first and the second syllable respectively, and not the other way round?!), but that the rules existed in the first place! For example, the ones rendering the stress in ‘complicated’ and ‘advertising’ totally predictable, and the ones responsible for the placing of secondary stress in words stressed on the 4th or 5th syllable, which I’d always thought to be pretty random. To go a step further, I hereby publicly admit that I prior to my move to Paris, I’d always pronounced one of the key words in our profession – i.e., ‘articulation’ – with the wrong placing of secondary stress! (well, if the occasional reader doesn’t know what these rules are, and doesn’t want to publicly admit it, they can always send me an email and ask – always glad to be of help!).

But even if you do get upset about your own ignorance of apparently obvious stress rules, or about your students’ persistence in pronouncing words like ‘village’ as if they rhymed with ‘old age’, there’s no being grumpy if you work in a place that is just 10 minutes away from Boulevard Saint-Michel, and if you know that your way back home, on bus 72, will resemble crucial scenes from hundreds of films with a working title ‘Where I went on a trip of a lifetime’. So, I’m happy – just like Stephen Clarke, who enjoys living here, in spite of the 15 tonnes of dog merde dumped on the city’s streets every year... Voilà!

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