

PORTRAIT DU MOIS
Portrait of the Month
Fevrier 2024

**Meet the people behind the Alliance Française de Reno.
We couldn't be here without them!**



An Interview with
Walter Frankmoelle
Board Member
His background, experience, and wise advice

Where, when, and how did you fall in love with the French language?

The “French Language and Me” ... at the beginning it was a “forced marriage”! I went to an old lingual high school in Germany, my country of birth. My parents were planning to move to a different state, where the educational language system was more modern, and I had to learn French instead of Greek as a third language. I liked the language right away but fell really in love with it during a bicycle trip from northern Germany all the way down to “Le-Grau-du-Roi” on the Mediterranean Sea. We slept under clear skies or pitched our tents when we had to and met the nicest and weirdest French people. The way they spoke, the French they used, was to my surprise very different compared to the school French I had learned to that point. I got very curious

- What elements of the French culture appeal to you the most?

Their kind of living: Where in the world was it common to see locals to have a ‘Pastis’ and a strong espresso at 7:30 am in the morning, while smoking a ‘Gitanes + Papier Maïs’ cigarette (= at that time the strongest non-filter cigarette), while jokingly greeting your fellow work buddies with “Bonjour crapule” (= “Hi low-life”) before starting work!? Not only these morning encounters, but all life (!) in France appeared to me less stiff compared to the one I was used to in my home country.

- How would you encourage someone to learn how to speak French?

(1) Vocabulary: Don't learn vocabulary one word at a time! That doesn't work. Sure you need a certain base, acquire the fundamental words, basic grammar, etc., but once you have mastered an A2, B1 level of French, learn new vocabulary only from context.

(2) The gist of it: Do not try to understand or look up every word of a written text or conversation. Understand the gist of it. The gaps will be filled in more and more, automatically, once you get better. The meaning of unknown words becomes clear from context. Even complex grammar will be acquired that way: it comes naturally.

(3) Oral comprehension: One of the most challenging difficulties of the French language are linked to what is called “liaison”, “enchaînement”, “élision” and “omission”. You hear a sentence and don’t understand what you think is “a single word”. You try to look it up in a dictionary, cannot find it, and then, at one point realize that what you thought was one word, is actually the ‘spoken combination’ of words, or part of words. Entire words are omitted and sound different because they’re “slurred together”. You can get used to that kind of understanding only through listening to Spoken French, Real Life French, by immersing yourself into all that is French.

(4) Don’t translate: While talking to someone in French, do not think in your native language, i.e., do not think in English and then translate what you are about to say. Think French, think simple French! Don’t try to say something complex, use simple French in the beginning. Become “fluent” by using simple French. Once you have mastered this, your French will improve dramatically.

(5) Traditional School French: In schools, traditional French teaching methods provide the basics of this foreign language. They try to teach students the main differences between French and their native language, mainly based on grammar. The complexity of it can often be overwhelming and discourage students from enjoying and appreciating what they are about to learn. They might know how to conjugate verbs after years of learning, but while on vacation in France for the first time, they realize that they cannot even ask for directions. What is missing is speaking and understanding everyday French, real life French, the French spoken “on the streets”. This kind of French can be acquired while visiting countries where French is spoken and/or dedicated French language schools there. Locally, you can learn French through classes provided by the Alliance Française, by listening to French podcasts, watching French movies with French subtitles, and listening to French news on TV.

(6) Learn French daily. What’s important is consistency. Every day an hour is better, than once a week for five.

- What are the most memorable experiences you've had in France or in a French environment?

As a teenager and young adult, I spent most of my annual summer vacations at the French Atlantic coast in the area between Arcachon Bay all the way down to Biarritz. I miss the vast beaches of Cap Ferret, sliding down the Dune du Pilat, the tallest sand dune in Europe, Biscarrosse Plage, Mimizan ... I am getting sentimental ...

In 2023, for the first time what seemed to be ages, a five week long motorcycle trip through Europe brought me back to France: mainly mountainous areas of the Alps, the Massif Central, the Pyrenees in both Spain and France. I will never forget one of the highlights of our tour: the French Vercors Massif, the hairpin descents, picturesque medieval villages, smallest of tunnels, cliffs and gorges, the spectacular “Cirque de Combe Laval” and others. Look it up but don’t look down, especially while riding a motorcycle!

Merci!
Thank you!