

I am so thankful I was a French Immersion grad.

If I could go back in time and share this with my 16 year-old self, I don't know what she'd say. While I'm at it, if I could tell my teenage self that the year I turned thirty, I'd pack up and move to France with my husband, I *really* don't know what she'd say!

But that's where my life has led me – to Le Plessis-Robinson, a beautiful suburb 30 minutes outside of Paris, France. I live there with my husband, Michael Brown, an electrical engineer originally from Erskine, Alberta. Mike works for a company called Schlumberger, where he designs the electronics that collect data from gauges in oil wells. In February 2014, Schlumberger announced they would be closing the Edmonton Product Center and Mike was offered a transfer to the office in France. After a lot of thought and discussion, we decided we would take the transfer and move to France.

It was a huge decision to make but it was made a little easier by the fact that I am a French Immersion grad. Growing up in Red Deer, I attended the immersion programs at École Mountview School, École Intermédiaire Central Middle School, and graduated with my bilingual high school diploma from École Secondaire Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School in 2002. My parents, both teachers with Red Deer Public Schools, put me in French Immersion because my mom's family background is French Canadian and they wanted me to become bilingual.

My French was dormant for a long time after graduation but when Mike and I traveled to France a few times before we moved here, my French came back (slowly), and it was a big help to us. Now that we live here, I speak French every day and the benefits are astronomical!

I can go shopping at the amazing market in our town center and joke with the man selling spices about Justin Beiber being Canadian. I can talk to the salesperson at the appliance store about the kind of oven we want to buy. I can help my Canadian friends buy their appliances. I can read the instructions for our new dryer. I can register for and take a dance class. I can have a pleasant conversation with my neighbors. I can speak to my doctor. I can ask for and give directions on the metro. I can get out and talk to people and not feel so lonely or isolated in this new place.

I can do so much more than order a meal or ask where the washrooms are in French - I can live here! And because I'm bilingual, I can help my husband and our other Canadian friends adjust to life in France.

My French is not perfect. I'm still reaching for words. I still blank sometimes on the right way to ask a question or pronounce something, but I'm improving. I'm sure I'm not alone when I admit that when I was growing up, I didn't always enjoy being a French Immersion student because of the challenge of taking my core subjects in French. It wasn't easy and it wasn't always fun, but I'm so thankful for what I gained from the experience. Besides the language skills, I've learned to persevere and to not give up when something is challenging. I've learned how to be resilient. I've learned how to listen to the stories of others. I've gained a rich, diverse vocabulary and I've strengthened my sense of humor. I'm so thankful for all this and the opportunities I have now because I am a French Immersion grad!

Before we left Canada, I was teaching Dance, Drama and English with Edmonton Public Schools. Now, I'm taking a course in Paris, through the International Language Center and the University of Cambridge, which will certify me to teach English as a Second Language. I know my experience as a student who learned a second language will help me in my teaching because I remember what it's like to struggle with a new language. I still struggle sometimes but I'm always learning and I'm excited to share that with others.

I had so many great French teachers throughout my education: Mme Ferguson and Mme Villeneuve at Mountview, Mlle Denyse and M. Golczyk at Central and M. Porkka, M. Pelletier and the late but great M. Malenfant at Thurber. I think of my teachers often when I'm going about my life here in France and I'm so thankful for what I learned from them. *Merci mille fois!*

To all current and future French Immersion students, I wish you all the best on your journey! It won't always be easy, but don't get discouraged! Work hard and embrace the challenge because you never know where it can lead you.