

## Match amical de football gaëlique

*« De prochains bacheliers irlandais en séjour linguistique dans des institutions privées de Laval et Mayenne, sous la responsabilité de Jean-Marc Bourguignon et Patrick Deprez de Living Language de Dublin ont été heureux de pratiquer leur sport favori face à l'équipe liffréenne. La rencontre arbitrée par Philippe Cornilleau a tourné à l'avantage de celle-ci: les visiteurs n'ayant pas de chaussures à crampons... »*

PHOTO SOUVENIR  
AVANT LA RENCONTRE IRLANDE VS. LIFFRÉ  
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## PARENTING



**SHEILA WAYMAN**

### Excerpt

Total immersion among native speakers is the best way to learn a language, but parents need to choose wisely before sending teens off for long stretches abroad

**N**OBODY PRETENDS it is easy for an Irish teenager plonked in a boarding school in a foreign country where nobody is speaking English. Tears and homesickness are to be expected as they struggle to find their tongue in a language which they write much more than they speak back home.

Michael John Murphy admits that on his first day alone aged 15 in a French boarding school in Le Mans, "I was in the toilets crying, calling my parents" on a mobile phone he had smuggled in. Like his two sisters before him, he was spending transition year in France because their mother, Barbara Murphy, believed it was beneficial not only for their language skills but also for their personal development.

He enrolled as a weekly boarder and spent the weekends in Paris with the family of another boy at the school. The daily regime involved lessons - all through French - from 8.30am to 5pm and then at least two hours of evening study before going to the dorms at 9pm and lights out at 10.30pm.

Barbara persuaded Michael John to persevere and, sure enough, after four weeks, he found the French began to click. "You start to understand what they say." At that point he reckoned he could stick it until Christmas - "but when Christmas came I thought, 'I am fine here'," says Michael John, who is now in sixth year back home at Rockwell College in Co Tipperary.

"At the start it was tough," he adds, "it got better as it went along and looking back, I had a great time!"

For teenagers like him, total immersion among native speakers of a language is invaluable at a time when the ability to speak at least one other foreign language has never been more important for job-seekers. Graduates increasingly need to have a command of at least one other language, beyond English and Irish, not only to secure employment abroad but also to compete for jobs at home where the global nature of business is developing all the time.

Parents are well used to the idea of

packing their children off to the Gaeltacht for weeks or even a year at a time, but similar trips to the Continent look equally - or, dare we say, even more - worthwhile. Of course, stretching the apron strings to another country, as opposed to just a few hours' car drive away, brings additional worries, logistical challenges and, not least, increased expense.

In the 2010 Leaving Certificate, just under half (47.7 per cent) of students sat French; for German it was 12.6 per cent; Spanish 6.3 per cent, but rising, while only 0.5 per cent of students took Italian.

**T**ransition year is an ideal time for secondary students to go abroad - whether it is on programmes organised by their school or by parents through private companies. They are not going to miss much academically and they are old enough to have a good chance of being able to cope on their own.

Living Language in Dublin organises school placements for transition year students primarily in France but also in Spain and Germany, ranging from one term lasting five or six weeks up to the full academic year. Director Jean-Marc Bourguignon stresses that preparation is key for success.

There is an enrolment test to determine abilities, briefing of parents and child, and then a language crash course before leaving Ireland. On arrival, there is a four-day preparatory course for the small group of teenagers who have travelled with Bourguignon from Ireland before they are placed individually in different, usually private schools, where they either board or live with a family vetted by the school.

He gets pressure from parents and students to allow friends to pair up in the same school, but he is adamant that just one Irish child per school is essential, so that they have to speak the language. However, there is the option of two-week programmes for small groups which are run in French schools after Irish schools close for the summer.



Michael John Murphy had "a great time" boarding in a French school but it was tough at the start.

Out of every 100 students, one or two would not work out. "The failure rate is very low if only because there is a test on enrolment," Bourguignon explains. "I will not take anybody who I feel is being pushed by the parents. Some parents have the means, but that is not sufficient for me because if the boy or girl is pushed it will be a disaster - not only will I get a bad name in Ireland but I will lose the French school - there is a limit to what they will tolerate."

Much comes down to the teenager's personality and upbringing - "I cannot change in six weeks, 16 years of being spoiled!" says Bourguignon, a native French speaker who first came to Ireland to study sociology at Trinity College, Dublin, before setting up Living Language in 1979.

Fluency is the aim for these students, rather than the niceties of grammar. "As long as they learn to pick up the sound on the spot and lose their inhibition to speak back, I consider the contract is fulfilled," he explains.

"Once you have some degree of fluency, it makes access to grammar easier and it raises the interest. Here they are getting in love with the language - and they mature."

Bourguignon recalls one mother asking him what he did to her son. "I said: 'What do you mean?' She said: 'I don't recognise him, he now makes his bed'."

Sending her first daughter, Alix, off to France was "a leap of faith", says Barbara, but she was pleased how it worked out for both her and her sister after her. They both got AIs in French in the Leaving (so no pressure Michael John!) and are now in UCD, studying, Medicine and business and law respectively, and speak fluent French.

**T**ransition year programmes abroad are an investment in a child's education but the costs are prohibitive for many parents.

For example, with Living Language, one French term (40-plus days) costs about €3,500 and a full year €14,800. That includes not only the preparation, school fees and board and lodging, but also a Living Language tutor who meets the teenager for a couple of hours each week to reinforce the foundations of the vocabulary they are picking up and is available if any problems arise.

"It is not a matter of dumping a child and saying, 'See you when it's over'," Bourguignon stresses.

## Living a foreign language