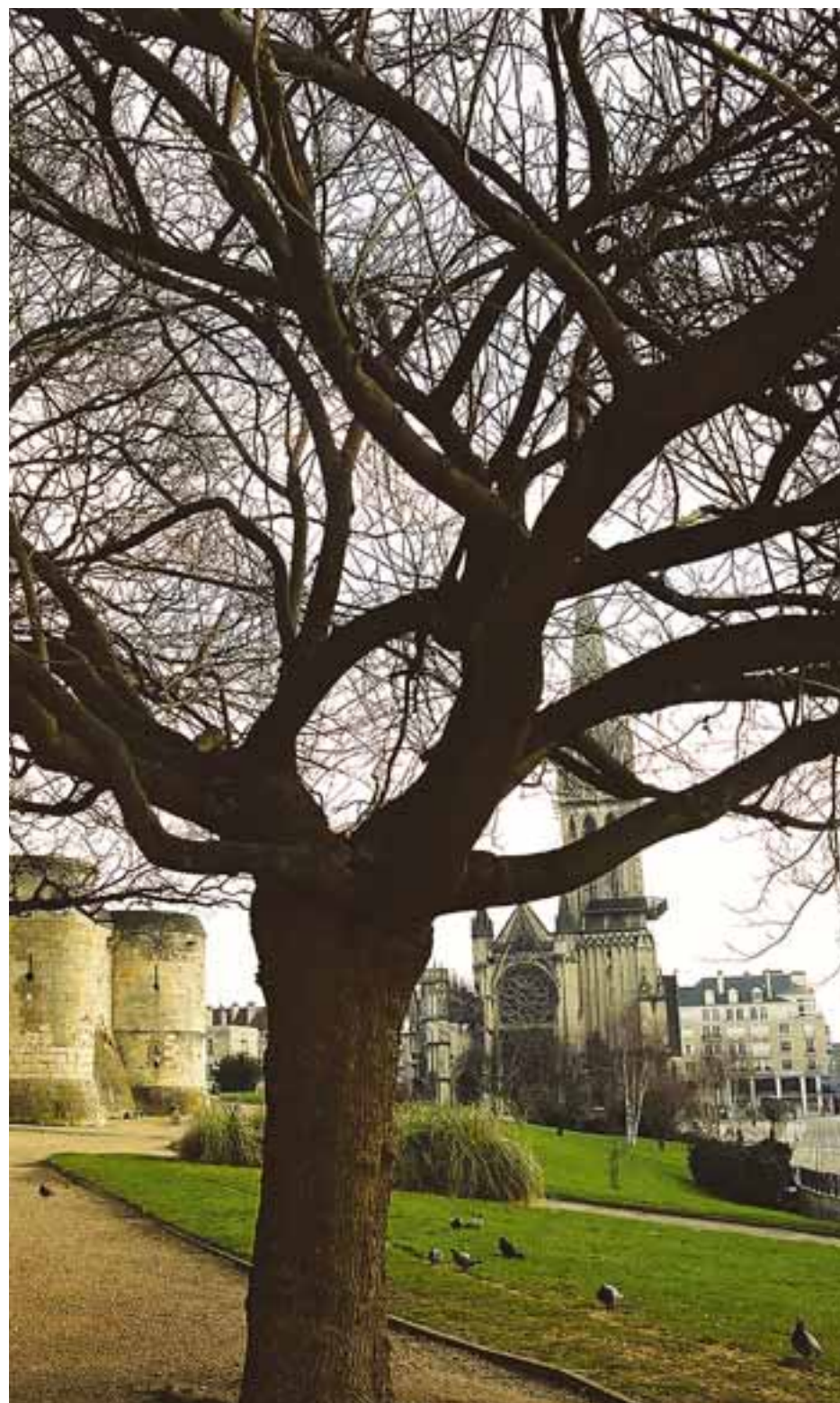


Bienvenue à Caen

'Learn a language' is on so many people's to do list, but often falls by the wayside. But many OU students are succeeding by taking a week out at the Action in French Summer School



THE base for the *Action in French Summer School* is the campus of Caen University, in Normandy, but the most important classroom is the 'open air' one – the town of Caen itself. In theory, at least, students speak nothing but French from the welcome reception on Saturday evening, to their departure on Friday afternoon.

A typical day at Caen begins with speaking French – over breakfast. Then it's into class for 45 minutes of *phonétique* – that is, pronunciation practice – before the day's main activities. Each day has a theme which is based on an aspect of French culture and the Caen locality. So on Monday, for example, it's *La Vie Quotidienne* – daily life. On Wednesday, it's *Histoire* – history. The theme gives a purpose and adds interest to all the activities.

Open air classroom

On Tuesday it's *Ecologie, Habitat and Voisinage*. The morning is spent talking and finding out about places in general, and Normandy and Caen in particular, while at the same time developing skills in description, expressing opinions and using the future or conditional tenses. Classes are grouped according to students' levels of French, and as well as the OU or Caen tutor (the teaching is shared by the OU and Caen University) each class has a tutor assistant who is a native French speaker.

After lunch it's off on the tram to the 'open air classroom', which this afternoon is a locality of the student's own choice – they can even venture outside Caen if they wish. It's an opportunity to follow up a topic that interests them – anything from Norman architecture to trainspotting – and use their French by noting down what they see and hear. Their research will be the basis for an oral presentation given later in the week.

Evenings are free – you can attend the optional grammar session, or you can do your own thing. There may be an activity on campus – a film, live music, a disco – which appeals, or the tutor assistants may organise a night on the town. Many students gravitate towards the popular bar.

It may be hard work, but the week includes a sightseeing trip to Bayeux and one afternoon (Wednesday) which is completely free. As well as tuition and materials the price includes accommodation and all meals on campus – but not your bar bill!

Top tips for fluency

STUDYING a language doesn't always mean you can use it, as many tongue-tied language students have found. So what's the secret of becoming an effective foreign language speaker? **sesame** asked OU French lecturer Elodie Vialleton, a native French speaker who also speaks English, and some Spanish and German, and has 10 years language teaching experience.

She said: "Part of the problem is the way languages used to be taught in schools, with a lot of emphasis on rules and grammar.

"Nowadays language classes are much more communicative, the focus is on speaking and interacting with someone else. It doesn't matter if your grammar isn't perfect, if you can get the message across. And hopefully, the classes are more fun.

"It is also about learning strategies for coping with what you know – so for example if you don't know how to conjugate a verb, you can make a sentence without the verb."

"Anybody who is interested can learn a language. You may be better at some things,

and not so good at others, but the thing is to focus on what you are good at."

And Elodie's top tips for learning a new language? "You need to immerse yourself in it. By going to the country, if possible, or by listening to the radio, finding articles on the web – although this is more difficult if you are a beginner.

"You need to enjoy it – it is much easier to learn something you enjoy. And don't focus on things you find difficult; try to use what you know instead of letting what you don't know stop you."

CASE STUDIES

BEVERLEY DEAN took up learning French again after a gap of 26 years. After being made redundant she took an evening class in conversational French to brush up her skills, but one of her fellow students suggested they do the OU residential course in Caen. Beverley, from Sutton-in-Ashfield, Notts, jumped at the chance. She told **sesame**:

"I loved it. If you want to learn to speak French fluently, I think a course like this one is the only way to do it.

"It's a little bit daunting at first, going up and speaking to strangers in a foreign language, but you really get into it and by the end of the week you don't even think about it because you're doing it all the time.

"In the evenings after you've done your studies there's a choice of things to do. You can watch films (in French) or attend optional grammar lessons, which is what we did. You just get into the culture and the language in much more depth than you would if, say, you went on holiday. Of course we did slip into a bit of English in the evenings – even though we weren't supposed to! – but otherwise we spoke French for an entire week.

"The tutors were really first class and we learned so much. Caen's lovely, too, with two abbeys, a museum, a river and an old town. It was fantastic value for money – and we rounded it off by going on to stay with a friend in Brittany for three days. That was good fun too – and because the course had made conversation in French so natural, we ended up speaking a lot more of the language there than we would have done!"

TIM FLEMING, a civil servant from Bracknell, Berkshire, started studying French with the OU so that he could converse more confidently over the phone with colleagues in France and Belgium. It was while doing *L192 Beginners' French* that he heard about the course in Caen and was soon packing his bags for a week in Normandy.

Tim said: "I started with the OU with rusty A-level French from 15 years ago, but constant conversation in the language does your skills a power of good – especially when you're talking to native speakers in their own country.

"It's a confidence thing – you start off the week being a bit hesitant but you become so immersed in the language that by the end of it you're no longer planning what you're going to say next – it's much more spontaneous. You find yourself thinking in French.

"We were in the classroom in the morning but in the afternoon we were given assignments which involved us going out on to the streets of Caen to talk to locals about the history and culture of the town.

"You don't get the same result if you just go to France on holiday. You might try a few phrases but a lot of the time you probably try to get by on as little of the language as possible – and certainly if you're on holiday, within your family group you will speak English.

"We spoke French all week, even to each other, and it really developed our skills. Obviously the classroom sessions were in French, and then we would speak to the locals in the language. Although the first time we went out we started explaining to a man that we were students who wanted to practise our French by talking to him, which amused him – it turned out he was an American!

"When we came back from our assignments, our debrief was in French and then in the evening we would go to bars and restaurants and order and talk to each other in French. It was total immersion and it worked wonders.

"But not only is the course good and the tutors excellent. We also had a great time. The sun shone throughout the week, the food was excellent, Caen has fascinating pockets of history and is in a beautiful part of Normandy – and there are some wonderful beaches. And of course if you did want to go on holiday in France, you could tag it on afterwards, which is what a few of my fellow students did. I'd recommend this course to anyone studying French – I'd go again like a shot!"

LXR122 Action in French (10 points)
One week French Summer School in 2006
Caen University, France. Price £435.
Weeks starting 8 July, 15 July, 22 July and 29 July in 2006.
For details, check www.open.ac.uk/action-in-french
or phone +44 (0)1908 654160 or +44 (0)1908 654164.