

Editor's Corner: Travel to a Foreign Land Teaches Many Lessons

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Travel to a foreign country can teach many lessons, particularly if you don't know the language. You learn what it is like to be illiterate. You learn what it is like to be deaf (sort of) -- you can see their lips moving but you have no idea what they are saying. You learn pantomime, sign language, and body language. You learn about cultural differences. You learn the value of Extension's programs on literacy and the value of providing educational materials in other languages.

I learned these lessons on a recent trip to France when I accompanied my husband on a business trip. Even though I had taken French in high school, my skills were 30 years old, and I was lucky to remember "Parlez-vous anglais?" which was totally inadequate. I received a "non" answer to this question as many times as I received a "oui." What follows are some of my more memorable experiences of my first trip to a country where English isn't the primary language.

We arrived in Paris well ahead of our luggage which was detained in London due to a computer failure. Because of the baggage handler strike in Paris, we were blissfully ignorant of our lack of luggage for about two hours. After the airline confirmed that we indeed had no luggage to claim, we proceeded to our hotel with only the clothes on our backs and promises that our luggage was soon to follow.

We checked into our hotel and proceeded, in spite of jet lag, lack of sleep, and no guarantee of fresh clothing on our return, to tour Paris by foot in hot, muggy weather. I was in the process of recovering from a bout of flu and a prolonged case of acute bronchitis, and I had not had any physical exertion for about two months. I later dubbed this walk The Paris Death March.

When we returned to our hotel, my husband and I went straight to the front desk to check on our missing luggage. The hotel employees could speak English fairly well, but their body language told me more than their words when they informed us that our luggage had not yet arrived. I knew something was wrong -- clong [\[1\]](#) looks the same in any language. The mystery was solved minutes after getting back to our room, when the phone rang with a hotel manager profusely

apologizing. Apparently his staff earlier told the airline not to send our luggage because we were not registered at this hotel. The vacation was not starting out well.

We spent three days in Paris before proceeding to Tours, which was our final destination. Frankly, I was happy to see Paris fade on the horizon. I never felt safe on the streets of Paris -- not that I was concerned about getting mugged or shot. Parisians don't need guns -- they have cars. Road rage is a national pastime in France, and Parisians are enthusiasts.

If you're from New York or Boston, you might not notice the traffic in Paris, but if you're from North Carolina, you notice cars speeding by within a foot or two of pedestrians, horns blaring, fists shaking, and following distances of two inches. There is no room for error on the streets of Paris. During our short stay in France, we witnessed several fender benders and one serious accident involving a motorcyclist. Pain also looks the same in any language.

For the most part, language was not a problem. English is the international language of science and business, so there was usually someone available who could communicate with us. However, the language barrier did occasionally create memories, if not problems. I'll not soon forget the two saleswomen who tried to explain to me that the item I was looking at was a pill box. They used pantomime to demonstrate its use. Fortunately, I knew what it was -- I just wanted to know the price. After they went to all that trouble, I didn't have the heart not to buy it. I just held out my money and let them take what they wanted. Not a practice I normally follow, but at the time it seemed to be the thing to do.

I'll also remember one instance where we could find no one who could speak English, and I was forced to dredge up my 30-year-old high school French. We were at the train station in Tours trying to find out if our train the next morning departed from the main station or the auxiliary station -- a significant difference when time is a factor. In halting French, I asked my question to the ticket salesperson. She beamed at me when I finally finished, and she communicated that the train departed from the main station. My husband was impressed, and I was exceptionally proud of myself -- until the niggling doubts started. Did I actually say what I thought I said? Did she say what I thought she said? The answers to both questions must have been "yes" because the train departed the next morning at the main station.

I felt the lack of language most acutely in the museums where the written explanations were in French. After having 20 years of formal education, illiteracy was a shock. I managed to dredge up isolated words from my high school French class, but I missed the gist of the explanations. The experience gave me just a taste of the frustration someone who cannot read or write must feel.

The few times that I ventured out by myself I saw a glimpse of what it is like for the thousands of Hispanics who move into North Carolina and do not speak English. Although I was surrounded by people, I felt isolated and frustrated. I had trouble meeting basic needs. Trying to follow directions on how to find the rest room or "toilette" was a challenge that required the help of three Parisians at one tourist attraction. Of course, how was I to understand that you entered the ladies' room through the men's room? I chalked that one up to a cultural difference.

As Extension in North Carolina takes on the challenge of translating its publications into Spanish, I have a few ideas about what might be helpful based upon my own limited experiences. Although English translations were necessary and most appreciated when they were available, I found dual translations the most helpful because they gave me the French words for the English words. The feelings of isolation I experienced motivated me to learn as much French as I could, even though I was there for only a short time. That motivation would have been overwhelming if I had planned to make France my home.

I would have also appreciated a list of essential words and phrases. I had a palm-sized translator that I found helpful, but you need time to use it, and life doesn't wait for you to type in the English word and then scroll through to find the appropriate French word or phrase. I wanted a pocket-sized plastic card that I could glance at to find essential words or phrases, such as "Where is the rest room?" or "How much does it cost?" Flash cards to cover various situations would have been very helpful. For example, a flash card could contain necessary words and phrases that might be used in a restaurant or a department store, and so on.

A chart of the signs used in France would also have helped. People think that pictures are universal and that everyone is going to know what they mean, but there may be cultural differences that cause confusion. For example, in one chateau that we toured, a sign outside a number of rooms showed a picture of the palm of a hand with a circle and line drawn through it. In my experience, the palm of a hand means "stop," and the circle with a line drawn through it means "no" or "don't." Did this sign mean "stop" or "don't stop?" To be safe, I stopped. I found out later that it meant "don't touch."

As I reminisce about my trip to France, I am struck by the fact that some of my strongest memories involve the difficulty of overcoming the language barrier. This powerful reminder of the importance of language underscores the need for Extension to reach out to the rapidly growing Latino/Hispanic population in North Carolina. In my opinion, Extension should do more than just provide educational materials in Spanish. Extension should also provide materials that help Latino/Hispanic newcomers learn the culture and the language of the country they now call home.

Note:

1. Clong is the rush of sh-t to your heart. Turow, Scott. 1987. *Presumed innocent*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux; p. 153. Clong happens -- for many reasons. In this case, the people at the desk experienced clong because they erroneously condemned our luggage to the black hole of unclaimed baggage. Fortunately, the mistake was caught before our luggage was shipped to our home address. [Return to text.](#)

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