

My Experiences as a French Learner in France and Montreal

This year, I had the wonderful opportunity to spend a long weekend in Montreal. As a French learner, opportunities to practice are always exciting to me, but I am especially excited to broaden my knowledge of the Francophone world by experiencing French across communities. My past French learning endeavors centered France's dialect and culture; however, with the Northeast's proximity to Montreal, I had always hoped to find the opportunity to learn about Quebecois language and culture as well.

In France, people would often switch to English when they noticed my American accent or I faltered over a single word, even if I wasn't struggling overall. Even when I would respond by telling someone that I spoke French, they would reply in English— and from what I've seen, this isn't unique to me. Some say that the French are too proud of their language to hear someone “butcher” it; however, I want to give them the benefit of the doubt, as most of the people I met were very friendly and supportive of my learning! I've come to realize a few potential reasons for this. Firstly, people might simply be excited to practice English, just as I jump at the chance to speak French. In other cases, if I've come across an unfamiliar word or asked someone to repeat themselves, people likely switch to be polite and helpful. However, when people don't switch, (or sometimes even if they do!) my obvious American-ness always raises curiosity, questions, and sometimes, compliments on my French.

In Quebec, the erosion of French is an ongoing issue loaded with political implications. Although Canada officially advocates for bilingualism, French is sometimes looked down upon by Anglophone Canadians, and pressure from the global trend of English linguistic dominance only intensifies the issue. As a result, Quebecois culture is very protective of the use of French,

which is a core component of French-Canadian identity. In Montreal, I noticed quickly that my accent and occasional utterances of “*quoi?*” were treated as unremarkable; most likely, because of the high number of Anglophone students and Anglophone Canadians living there, people are used to communicating with those in the process of learning French. People rarely switched to English entirely or commented on the fact that French was clearly my second language.

One night, in search of poutine, I ended up at a popular hole-in-the-wall restaurant serving Quebecois dishes. One of the first things that I noticed was that the menu was only in French, whereas most other menus I had seen in other parts of Montreal had been bilingual. While speaking with the cashier, we stayed firmly in French. It was quite loud in the restaurant, so to my embarrassment, I had to ask him to repeat himself quite a few times— not due to language troubles, but because of hearing troubles in general! Sometimes, he would just tell me the word in English with an amused look and then return to French. Looking, this interaction was a microcosm of Quebec’s larger linguistic politics: out of linguistic pride, English-French bilingual Quebecois people assert the language’s validity by persisting in using French, even with clearly non-native-French-speaking Anglophones.

I valued this opportunity to explore the dynamics of a bilingual region of a country in which it is a linguistic minority, which was deepened by my access to both languages. I hope to reflect further on this experience as I continue to explore the intersection of language and politics globally. I especially want to continue learning about this topic this semester in Spain, which contains linguistic minority regions such as Catalonia. Language influences so many different kinds of things; for me, understanding the significance of languages not only in terms of interpersonal communication, but also in society in general, is one of the most important parts of language-learning.

