

SCHOOL *of* LIFE

Teaching English can be a great way to carve out a career when you move to France. Andy Ward tells Alison Weeks how his love of language helped him to create his new life across the Channel

Nord-Pas-de-Calais was not the first choice destination for Andy Ward when he was sent to France for a year as part of his degree course. In fact, he says he was disappointed to end up in the northern region just a hop across the Channel. Andy first visited France to fulfil a requirement for his European studies degree, when he was assigned to be an English teaching assistant at a school in a town between Lille and Dunkirk. “I have to admit, at first I was disappointed to be sent to the north of France. I had hoped to spend my year abroad somewhere warmer,”

laughs Andy. But he soon fell in love with the town of Hazebrouck and its people – and in particular Olivia, a local university student and self-proclaimed Anglophile. Andy had to return to finish his degree in the UK and Olivia was enrolled in a university in Lille. In spite of the difficulties of a long-distance relationship, they maintained a trans-Channel romance for five years before tying the knot in 2003, when Andy was finally able to move back to France. They spent their first years as a married couple in Lille, where Olivia worked as a primary school teacher

and Andy taught English at local language centres. But after the birth of their first child, they decided it was time for a new career move. They both loved teaching, but wanted more flexibility and control over their schedules. So when they were offered the chance to open their own language school, they knew it was an opportunity they couldn't pass up. Their school was to be a franchise of Les Petits Bilingues (The Little Bilinguals), a language school for children in Lille, where Andy had taught for several years. Founded in 1992, Les Petits Bilingues is the brainchild of Guillaume Devred-



to be able to quit her public teaching job and work with me full-time to help with the administration side of the business,” says Andy. “But for the moment, we still rely on her salary to supplement our income from the centres.”

To cut down on commuting time between the two centres, Andy and Olivia moved to Oye-Plage, about halfway between Dunkirk and Boulogne. Situated on the Côte d'Opale, Oye-Plage is a quiet coastal town, boasting pristine sandy beaches and a beautiful nature reserve. An avid outdoorsman, Andy enjoys being near the sea and making the most of their sizeable garden in his spare time.

“I love this area. It may not be the sunniest part of France – the weather is usually the same as it is in England – but the people here are so warm and friendly. Admittedly, I'm biased as my wife grew up in this region and I'm beginning to adopt the northern mindset, but I think there's truth in the local saying: ‘Les gens du Nord ont dans le coeur le soleil qu'ils n'ont pas dehors’ (‘Northern people have in their hearts the sunshine that they don't have outside’).”

“It's also nice to be so close to England; we can be at my parents' house in Buckinghamshire in less than three hours. And on a clear day I can even see the white cliffs of Dover from the beach near our house.”

In spite of the proximity to the UK, British people are still something of a rarity around here. To help get the word out about Les Petits Bilingues, Andy drives a traditional London taxicab, emblazoned with the

Smith, an Anglo-French entrepreneur who wanted to share the English language (his mother tongue) with his French children. Unlike conventional language institutes, Les Petits Bilingues offers a more playful approach to language learning and welcomes students as young as three.

When Andy and Olivia set out to open their Petits Bilingues franchise in 2010, there were already several successful branches in Paris and around France. The challenge was to take the brand to a more rural area.

“We knew we wanted to stay in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, but weren't sure exactly where,” says Andy. “After some research, we decided Dunkirk would be the best place to start. It's a growing city and with the ferry links to the UK, English is essential for local businesses.”

Starting a business in France can be complicated, even for the French. And although they were starting a franchise with the support of the

parent company, Andy and Olivia were overwhelmed by the sheer amount of paperwork involved, not to mention the financial obstacles they had to overcome.

“We had to raise a substantial amount of money to get started. The financial strain has been stressful

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because as with any business venture, there's an element of risk involved. But now that we're three years in, we're beginning to reap the rewards. And we're hoping the business continues to grow,” says Andy.

Overall, business is going well for the couple and after the success of the centre in Dunkirk, they opened a second school in nearby Boulogne-sur-Mer.

“Our ultimate goal is for Olivia

Facing page, clockwise from left: Andy enjoys sharing his British culture; children as young as three attend the classes; the interactive lessons
This page, left to right: the Ward family; a nearby nature reserve



school's logo. The taxi attracts a lot of attention, making him something of a local celebrity. Even people who don't know the school know of 'that English guy who drives the taxi'.

"One of my favourite parts of Les Petits Bilingues is sharing British culture with our students. It's not just about language immersion; it's also a cultural experience. At work, I'm kind of recreating the reverse of what I experience every day as an expat in France. The kids come here and leave France at the door. Here we speak, play and sing in English."

"Teaching three-year-olds a foreign language might seem a bit extreme, but at this age, children are just like sponges"

Andy and Olivia used British and American posters to decorate the classrooms, which are kitted out with toys, games and books imported from Britain and the US. They also insist on only having classes taught by native English speakers. So far, Andy has a team of six teachers working for him, but he worries about being short-handed if the business continues to grow.

And it looks as though he might have something to worry about, as the local response to Les Petits Bilingues has proven incredibly positive.

"The parents tell me that their children love coming here and they look forward to it all week. They're also really impressed with how much progress their kids have made with the language."

Currently between the two centres, Andy oversees 35 English



classes a week. The busiest days are Wednesdays and Saturday mornings. The rest of the week, Les Petits Bilingues offers afternoon classes for older students and morning sessions for toddlers.

"Teaching three-year-olds a foreign language might seem a bit extreme, but at this age, children are just like sponges. They absorb everything."

"I taught adult classes for years and it was almost impossible to get my students to pronounce certain English words correctly. They all had that stereotypical French accent that makes 'thanks' sound like 'zanks'. But my younger students don't have



Clockwise from top left: the beach at Oye-Plage; play and learn; colourful classrooms; daughter Amy; Andy and Olivia love the area; Andy's famous London taxi

any trouble. They repeat every word with perfect English accents."

The Wards also live the bilingual experience at home, where Andy speaks exclusively in English to his children and to Olivia, only in French. Their oldest daughter, Amy, five, effortlessly switches between



the two languages according to her audience. And although her younger brother Aiden, two, isn't quite so talkative, he's quickly learning to follow in his sister's footsteps.

There may be a lot of English spoken at the Ward family home, but the lifestyle is decidedly French. Both Andy and Olivia make a point of coming home for lunch with the children, in spite of their busy schedules.

"It sounds trite, but it's really the little things I love about life here," says Andy. "Like going to the bakery on a Sunday morning to get fresh croissants for the family."

"I feel like we have the best of both worlds in Pas-de-Calais. We're

just a stone's throw from the UK, so I don't feel completely disconnected from my friends and family, but our lifestyle is drastically different from how it would be if we lived in England. We benefit from the lower cost of living and are able to afford a much bigger house than we would in the UK. But I also prefer the quality of life, the slower pace and of course the great food that we have in France."

With a growing business and new baby, Charlie, the Wards definitely have their hands full. But they seem to balance it all remarkably well.

"People say that it's more difficult to make a business work in France and it definitely has been a challenge, but I think the rewards are greater." LF

Setting up a language school

Do your research. Know your neighbourhood well. Is there a growing need for the English language? How many schools exist in your area already? You could set up a language school for children or adults, or both. Remember to think outside the box, as there is plenty of competition. And be on the look out for new trends. Some schools even offer English lessons over the phone.

A TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) qualification as well as some teaching experience is invaluable, but not mandatory. There are many TEFL courses available in the UK.

Make sure you have the organisational skills (or sufficient help) to cope with the paperwork and French administration. You can register as an *auto-entrepreneur* if you plan to run a one-person business and your annual turnover remains below a set amount. If you plan to hire other teachers, you will need to register with the URSSAF.

If setting up a franchise seems like the best option, there are several to choose from, in addition to Les Petits Bilingues. Berlitz, Wallstreet Institute and Inlingua are some of the most well known.

It doesn't have to be a franchise. You can start up from scratch if you have the training and speak French well enough to get through the red tape.

More information: www.britishcouncil.org, www.lautoentrepreneur.fr, www.anglais.urssaf.fr

