

You Don't Have to Be All Alone to Tap Into the Energizing Quiet

I'm partway through my second semester of auditing an introductory French course at a local college, "auditing" being a code word for "I'm taking the full-fledged class, but I'm paying almost nothing for it — and I don't get graded; I can just learn for the sake of it." It's a beautiful arrangement, one that eliminates a great deal of the stress involved.

But not nearly all of it.

For starters, I am a shade (three decades) older than the regular, everyday undergraduates in the class. I think I fit in pretty well; in true introvert form, I simply try to **blend** in. To the degree that a 50-year-old, 6-foot-4-inch guy with long hair and a gray beard can pull this off, I do. But I still stick out — especially when a) I frequently remember the historical events the instructor mentions that occurred long before my classmates were born; and b) my personal brand in class has become "Le Vieil Homme Qui Déteste les Examens Orals": "The Old Man Who Hates Oral Exams."

Even more stressful — and therefore predictably draining — is the daily classroom culture, which by design and, really, necessity involves unending interactions where we newbies to the language do our best to talk to each other and the professor. In French, of course. "Broken French" sort of understates it, as does "Franglais." Which is why our professor should be nominated for either sainthood or a set of noise-canceling headphones.

We students, feeding off of the professor's remarkable supply of genuine patience and encouragement, have a healthy, we're-all-in-this-together attitude about our classroom, um, discussions. But it's a tough thing to do, day in and day out. Especially when you're an introvert — like me, for example — and you have to not only think on your feet, but perform linguistic feats. In French, of course.

The other day, for example, we spent the first 30 minutes of the 70-minute session walking around the room, asking each other and responding to — in French, of course — more than 20 questions the professor had taped to the walls on little scraps of paper. It was just another day at the office. It could just as well have

been one of the frequent days when we have what I can only call conjugation races: Three or four teams of us line up in the front of the room, and we race to conjugate various French verbs, writing our often creative answers on the white board — in French, of course — while frantically trying to extract them from our brains.

In Franglais, of course.

I have to concede that, in their own way, these activities are kind of fun. They put you in situations exactly like the ones you'll be in if you're really trying to speak French to a real French speaker in a real French-speaking setting. That's why I signed up for this course in the first place last September, and it's why I re-upped a few weeks ago to take a second semester.

Basically, I asked for this.

But somehow, still, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning during my drive to campus, I naively pray: "Please, God, let us just sit and learn today."

God, though He is infallible, chuckles and responds: "Well, you will sit in your chair in class and talk to the people around you in the kind of French only a mother could love. In the process, you will learn. Prayer answered."

Perhaps it's no wonder, then, that when I go to class each day, I go not just a little early, but ridiculously early. As in 20, 25, 30 minutes early. I need to be able to just sit, in peace, and get myself into student mode. Introverted student mode. Alone.

But lately I've noticed something: No matter how early I myself arrive, there's always one other guy who is either already there or who arrives at virtually the same time as I do. And for the last week or two, we've been joined by a young woman doing the same thing.

Perhaps this doesn't strike you as newsworthy. But when it means, for example, that I was not alone today in arriving at 9:54 a.m. for a class that begins at 10:30 a.m., it's not so out there to think that something's up. Something well beyond simply not being late.

It's a silent arms race.

Maybe I should call it a space race. The three of us students, all of us obviously similar in personality if not nearly so similar in longevity, clearly need to charge up for what's to come. And we all would seemingly prefer to do that alone. So we all keep going to class earlier and earlier in an attempt to outflank each other.

Pretty soon we'll be lined up outside the classroom door — or the locked academic building — at 9:54 p.m. the previous night, making sure we claim our alone time as though it's in limited supply during a Black Friday sale.

Fortunately, though, I don't really need to come out on top in this introverted chess match. Neither do my deux (two) fellow étudiants (students). We just share the quiet, silently confirming what's going on and why.

And seemingly knowing that we all win.