Heather's address at CAL Launch

Bonjour, tout le monde. Don't worry, I won't be doing the whole thing in French – I don't think my sore throat can handle that many "rs" anyway. As Frank just said, I'm Heather, I'm a 2014 graduate of Hawker College currently studying medicine at UNSW, and I'm here because I love learning languages.

Being able to speak another language has always seemed like a superpower to me. I'm forever jealous of my friends with foreign backgrounds, or those who were born overseas, as they can often switch between three or four languages without even thinking. It opens up an entire new world (or worlds) for them, and gives access to a glorious cultural tapestry many people can't touch.

This passion is what got me through years of mandatory language learning in high school, and what convinced me to continue it in college. When I chose it, people thought I was a little crazy – "you're trying to get into med, shouldn't you be studying physics or something?" – but by then, I'd been studying French for two years and I'd fallen in love with it. I had (and still have) a dream of becoming fluent in the language, even though I could barely speak or understand a word at the time.

I think taking French in college was one of the best decisions I've ever made. In many ways, it was just so much more fun than biology and maths, and gave me a sort of reprise from some of my more stress-inducing subjects. I love that stuff too, of course, but in French I got to explore art, politics, popular culture and more, instead of memorising formulae and parts of cells. Looking back, I think that, in general, studying a language just made me a more well-rounded person, which is especially important to me now that my life's been taken over by learning about bones and watching babies being born.

It's funny, because although I didn't think that I'd learnt a lot of French in college, in April 2015, only four months after graduating, I moved to Lyon for three months as a part of my gap year adventure and managed to get by very easily. By the end of my stay, I was conversationally fluent in French (unfortunately, quite a bit of it's disappeared now as I haven't been able to practice) and I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't developed a base in grammar, vocabulary, writing and reading in college. Living in France was absolutely life-changing for me. Lyon is truly a second home now, and I hope to someday return for good.

What this last four minutes brings me to is this: I'm so excited for the academy. I chose my school knowing that I could study French – if they hadn't offered it, I would have gone elsewhere. But now, that's not necessary, and it's really exciting to think that all Canberran students will have the opportunity to learn a language.

I hope the Canberra Academy of Languages will encourage students to open their minds and discover new cultures, just like French did for me. To me, a life with multiple languages is richer and fuller than one without, and I hope that the academy helps more students realise that. I wish everyone the best of luck in starting up this enterprise. Oh, and of course, if you ever create a languages academy in Sydney for poor uni students, let me know! Merci et bonne chance.

Heather Macpherson