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I used my IRIS grant to subsidize the cost of tuition at a 7-week French language immersion program at Middlebury College, which took place this summer (2021) in beautiful Vermont. Since arriving in graduate school in 2018, I had been trying to attend this particular program, which is nationally renowned for its culture of complete immersion, regardless of skill level upon arrival. Importantly for me, they offered spots and financial aid to non-resident aliens (my visa status), which is not usually the case at peer summer programs. Unfortunately, and despite my best efforts, I could not cobble together enough grants to cover the costs to attend, even after financial aid, which saw me declining my admission offer each year. It was during the pandemic that a lightbulb went off in my head: perhaps I could repurpose my IRIS grant, which I had received as an incoming graduate student, toward the costs of this Middlebury immersion program?

I thought it was a long shot—I would be staying in the U.S., after all, and not travelling overseas to research—but the folks at the IRIS center were more than obliging. They understood the impracticality (and impossibility) of travelling overseas during the pandemic and recognized that the French immersion program was indeed a rich cultural experience in service of my dissertation. With their stamp of approval, I was finally able to accept my offer of admission to the Middlebury summer program and excitedly purchased my flights to VT.

What followed was an unforgettable language experience that pushed me so comprehensively out of my comfort zone that I even experienced culture shock (yes, in a college town in Vermont!). As I expected, the language immersion was complete: I was only allowed to speak French for 7 weeks, even though I didn't have much French to begin with. Every class was in French, co-curricular activities were in French, every meal was in French in the dining hall. In fact, the immersion experience is so carefully orchestrated that one has to actively go out of their way to hear a different language. I remember feeling so starved of English during the middle of the program that I walked slowly behind a campus tour that was being offered by the College to prospectus students (in English!). Hearing my mother tongue in this context of immersion was truly bizarre, and something I'll never forget.

When the program ended, after 7 long weeks, my French had improved dramatically. When I arrived, I was placed at an early intermediate level (A2, for those who know the DELF system). When I left, I was advanced intermediate (B2, again for those who know DELF). I am certain that I would never have made this progress without Middlebury, and I would never have been afforded the opportunity to study there without the IRIS grant.

Now, as I return to normal life in the Anglophone world, I am well placed to read, analyze and dissect primary sources in French for my dissertation—this was my primary reason for learning French in the first place. But dissertation work aside, I have discovered that I now have a second language to continue improving and discovering. Since leaving Middlebury, I have enrolled in classes at the Alliance Française, I read daily news in French, and I am even reading my first novel *en français* (Harry Potter!). I feel both culturally enriched, humbled by the difficulty of learning a second language, and inspired to continue this journey. I offer my sincere thanks to the folks at the IRIS center for making this dream possible.