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So That All May Speak: Inviting All to Describe Themselves in the L2 French Classroom

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In this article, I examine two focal students of L2 French whose curiosity and embodied learning inspired me to rethink my teaching about personal gender expression and grammatical gender and to develop curricular innovations that would open up pathways for self-expression in the L2 French classroom.

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"*Professeur*, how do you talk about the trans and non-binary experience in French?"[1]

That question, which Océane,[2] a high school student of first-year French, asked me, gave me pause. It marked a turning point during an introductory lesson on grammatical gender in French when an L2 (second language) learner asked how a person who was trans or non-binary might describe themself[3] in the French language, the standardized variety having two grammatical genders. The class of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds was just beginning to learn about grammatical gender in French (*masculin* and *féminin*). Having previously taught L2 French at a different site, I understood the cognitive difficulty that L1 (first language) English users often had in mapping a binary[4] gender system onto the entire world. I had naïvely never

[1] *Cisgender* refers to a person "who exclusively identifies as their sex assigned at birth" (TSER, n.d.). For instance, I identify as a cisgender man, the sex that doctors assigned me at birth. In parallel, *transgender* includes "many gender identities of those who do not identify or exclusively identify with their sex assigned at birth" (TSER, n.d.). For example, author and activist Janet Mock (2014) identifies as a transgender woman because she does not identify her gender identity with the sex she was assigned at birth. Also central in this article is an understanding of *nonbinary*: "Preferred umbrella term for all genders other than female/male or woman/man, used as an adjective (e.g. Jesse is a nonbinary person). Not all nonbinary people identify as trans and not all trans people identify as nonbinary. Sometimes (and increasingly), nonbinary can be used to describe the aesthetic/presentation/expression of a cisgender or transgender person" (TSER, n.d.).

[2] All subject and place names in this paper are pseudonyms. The subjects selected their own pseudonyms.

[3] I choose to use the nonstandard pronoun *themself* in this paper because of the student Zéphyr's preferred usage of the singular pronoun series *they/them/their/themself* to refer to their individual self. For a popular reading on the rise of and reasoning for this usage, consider Chi Luu's (2015) *JSTOR Daily* article found at https://daily.jstor.org/theyre-here-theyre-genderqueer-get-used-to-gender-neutral-pronouns/?utm_source=internalhouse&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=jstordaily_05142015&cid=eml_j_jstordaily_dailylist_05142015.

[4] *Binary* in reference to gender refers to a system in which two, oppositional categories of grammatical gender exist. In standard French grammar, gender is binary in that the noun phrase and adjectives are categorized as either *masculin* or *féminin*. In comparison, English grammar has three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter, the first two of which are semantic, primarily associated with biological or assigned sex. Unlike French, English does not have gender classifications that require agreement of nouns with other word categories, and/or inflections. The English division into male, female and neuter represent semantic gender classifications, not grammatical classifications.

considered, however, the limits that a learner whose gender expression might be non-normative or non-binary might encounter in mapping the French gender system onto themself.

In this article, I examine two focal students whose curiosity and embodied learning inspired me to rethink my teaching about personal gender expression and grammatical gender and to develop curricular innovations that would open up pathways for self-expression in the L2 French classroom.

CONTEXT

I came to high school L2 French instruction with several years' experience teaching French as a Romance linguistics graduate student at a large, public research university in California. As a researcher at that time, I was conducting doctoral-level research on the language-learning classroom, incorporating extensive ethnographic fieldwork in high school classrooms. Five days a week, one hour at a time, creative and curious students engaged with the daunting and exciting task of connecting meaning to form as they learned the intricacies of the French language. I was unquestioningly content to be the facilitator and guide in that learning. Because of my own personal interest and thorough linguistic training, I enjoyed teaching grammar as well as providing answers to the possible reasons why forms were what they are in French. In my several years as an L2 French instructor, I fielded all sorts of questions about the subtleties and irregularities of French morphology and syntax: Why this? Or, what is the reason for that? But it was later in my high school teaching that a question arose about French grammar that touched my heart and led me to change how I teach something which had once been so familiar.

The secondary school in which I presently teach is situated in a racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse mid-sized city in California. The school is a private, Roman Catholic institution, serving students between the ages of 14 and 18, 90% of whom identify as non-white and 50% of whom identify as non-Catholic. As it pertains to this study and pedagogical intervention, I identify as a Catholic, cisgender man of mixed ethnicities (Northern European Mexican). The 15 students involved in the study reflected the school's racial diversity: one of the 15 self-identified as white/Northern European. Of the students who were gender-conforming, seven were male, and seven were female. The remaining student, central to this inquiry, began presenting themself as gender non-conforming over the course of that academic year.

Classroom Set-Up

The particular learning space in which Océane asked her question did not have a traditional classroom set-up. Instead of four tidy rows of six desks, each with perfectly postured students facing the teacher and white board in the front of the classroom, the 24 desks formed a semi-circle in which each member of the class could see each other, and I, their French instructor, could sit among them if I so chose. We could easily move the modular furniture around the room, often creating open space for conversation circles and walkabouts around the classroom. This ability to see and interact with each other turned out to be significant because it permitted students the ability to perceive each other both physically and emotionally, resulting from their different forms of interaction. The classroom set-up and the students' use of the space created the conditions by which they could thus sense the emotional tenor of the

room and could pinpoint who needed an ally on any given day. In a high school setting, learning spaces that foster emotional support and positive social alignments are crucial for adolescent learners.

Océane

A 13-year-old, cisgender girl with thick, wavy black hair and dark-framed glasses forming circles around her eyes, Océane was one of these sensitive and sensible young people. She herself moved among cultural contexts whose symbolic power was dynamic and shifting depending on different ethnic and speech communities. She identified as Japanese, Hawaiian, and African-American. Her mother's home was bilingual, and she spoke in ways that complicated others' expectations of her as a young woman of color. Both in and out of French class, she used feminine pronouns, which align with her assigned sex. She self-identified as a feminist and brought in readings both in English and French that looked at different kinds of feminism across the world. In French class, she chose the name *Océane*, sharing the name with a classmate. Océane expressed personal, academic, and artistic interests that were not restricted to gender, ethnic, or racial stereotypes; she was open to and curious about ideas and experiences that transgressed borders.

During this initial lesson on grammatical gender in French, Océane sat at her desk at the midpoint of the semicircle, one sneakered foot tucked beneath the other leg, typing notes on her digital tablet. Océane was paying close attention, and not just to my instruction. When she was not typing, she would arch her back and draw back her shoulders so that she could look up and around the room in an inconspicuous way. Her body was tense in a way that suggested that she did not want to miss a thing.

And, indeed, Océane did not miss anything: At a pause for questions about the grammar lesson, she asked a question that drives my inquiry to this day. This inquisitive young adolescent, having looked around and sensed that someone different from the other people in the room was in our midst, wondered aloud how the French language made allowances for people who were trans or non-binary to represent themselves linguistically. Indeed, another student in the class, Zéphyr, would later identify as nonbinary in different public and private spaces over the course of their high school career. I took Océane's authentic wondering to heart because I knew that she understood difference and complexity at a fundamental identity level. A middle class, cisgender, multiracial, and multilingual young woman who was well regarded by her peers and teachers, Océane used her awareness, social privilege, and social power to voice what at least one other person might have been thinking about French but was too reticent to ask. During this lesson, Océane had discreetly noticed Zéphyr, silent but attentive, and she had used her voice to ask a question that, even if she was unaware, might benefit Zéphyr, if not other students in the room. As the instructor, I, in turn, was absolutely caught off guard by Océane's query. (But what was it that I had been guarding which had prevented me from ever considering alternative gender expressions in French?) I had no answer and fell back on the common response "Well, I don't know, but I will look it up and find out."

Moreover, Océane was the ideal language learner: She wanted to take risks in language and wanted to test the limits of what language could represent and what stories it could express. I look back now and realize that it really was no wonder that this particular person, with so much lived experience and natural curiosity already at the age of 13, could see the limits that we were up against in that lesson on 'masculin' and 'féminin.' She wanted to find a way to

push that limit, to break that rule. Because of her curiosity and empathy, she used that question to throw light on an often invisible area that links grammar learning to social representation and practice.

Zéphyr

Zéphyr was another student who never missed a thing, who watched often in silence and catalogued the goings-on in the classroom. They[5] demonstrated early in their learning a facility with learning French at all traditional levels: lexical, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. Zéphyr, the student's chosen name in French class, did not resist participating orally in class, but they preferred using writing and reading to demonstrate their learning. Like Océane, Zéphyr took thorough notes on their digital tablet and listened attentively to all classroom talk. Unlike Océane, Zéphyr exhibited different body posture. When seated at a desk, they would curve the line of their back inward, with their head tilted slightly downward. This body positioning suggested their preference to turn inward and not to thrust themself too visibly into class activity. Nonetheless, they would visually track my instruction and the responses of other members of the class.

I came to know Zéphyr as well outside of French class in a school club that invited members of the school community to "[a] forum for conversation about gender identity and other issues related to traditional and non-traditional roles" (Club Mission Statement). Zéphyr became active in the club during their junior year at the same time that I became the club's faculty moderator. Assuming a leadership position allowed them to express more openly their gender identity, especially in a linguistic exercise the club did at the beginning of each meeting. All individuals, both student and adult participants, would provide in English their preferred first names, preferred personal pronouns, and an emotional check-in. This exercise allowed all participants to name themselves, and, for Zéphyr in particular, it allowed them in that semi-public meeting space to self-identify with the English third person pronoun series *they/them/their/theirs*. In the four years of my participation in the club, Zéphyr was the only student who chose those pronouns, but the act of them doing so and its positive reception contributed to a sense of a safe place to name identity.

Thus, Zéphyr was constructing three linguistic identities simultaneously across their four years in high school. Outside of French class, in public and in heterodominant English spaces, they used a gender-neutral version of their given first name and feminine pronouns, which align with their assigned sex. In our club and with known allies, they used *they/them/their/theirs*. In French class, they were *Zéphyr*, who, on their own and with my instruction, explored the debate about both gender inclusive and non-binary inclusive language. They engaged with the tension between standard and non-standard French use, using their strong decoding and semantic skills to find the right usage for themself. Although often shy and silently observant, Zéphyr grew to become more verbally expressive in French over the course of the four-year program. As their own self-awareness around gender identity and expression bloomed, so did their experimentation with different French linguistic forms. The paradox of the near invisibility of and the fierce arguments about non-traditional gendered language in French might have influenced their eventual choice in French (see below for a brief summary of the core debate). During their last two years of studying high school French, they used the masculine singular personal pronouns series *il/le/lui* and the accompanying adjective forms.

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[5] In personal communication, Zéphyr expressed their preference for the non-standard English third person pronoun series *they/them/their/theirs*.

These three linguistic identities point to a certain separation of identities within Zéphyr. They spent their high school career moving among these identities, alert to possible shifts in their personal safety as well as in others' perceptions. This deep awareness and move to push up against the limits of standard language use in both their L1 English and L2 French indicates Zéphyr's symbolic competence as a deft user and learner of language. Indeed, following Heidenfeldt and Vinall's (2017) exploration of symbolic competence, Zéphyr "maneuver[s] through language learning and language use that is neither static, nor uni- or bidimensional, nor goal-oriented in the same way that other language-related competences (e.g., grammatical competence and communicative competence) are traditionally defined" (p. 5). In both English and French, Zéphyr knew the rules of the standard languages and bent them in different contexts in order to fashion their developing self. Zéphyr needed to construct these three linguistic identities in order to remember, imagine, and enact all of the identities that they had been living. The pressures of being in both an ethnic Roman Catholic family and a small Roman Catholic high school added to the need to maintain and monitor separate identities for this adolescent language learner. Eventually, in private conversation just before graduating, Zéphyr beamed that they would be living in an LGBTQIA-identified space at university and was planning on making public their preference of *they/them/their/theirs* in their campus interactions.

CURRICULAR CHANGES

These two language learners inspired me to invite change into our L2 French classroom. I first wanted to change my own relationship with how I thought about and taught some fundamentals in French. I began by reading media reports in both English and French from US, British, French, and Québécois sources to begin to understand the discussion about inclusive language use in French (For these sources, see the References section). I sought to map out how governments, educators, and queer activists were framing the debate around these prescriptive linguistic changes around personal gender. I began with this examination of inclusive language because, although it has focused primarily on male/female parity in language use, I thought that it might shed some light on innovative forms that might be adopted by individuals who are gender nonconforming.

Regarding language use in France, I found a polarized debate between conservative and progressive language gatekeepers. Proponents to keep the spoken and written binary gender pronoun and adjective forms as the only options for personal gender have been most represented by the Académie Française. This is the venerable, federal institution founded in France in the 17th century that is charged with responding to questions about the language and producing and revising a national dictionary. Public school teachers in France have strongly opposed the Académie's rejection of non-traditional forms, especially at the primary school level. Following recommendations by the *Institut européen pour l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes* (2018) (or European Institute for Gender Equality), French publishing company Hatier released classroom textbooks for primary school students (see Le Callenec & François, 2017), using *l'écriture inclusive* ("inclusive writing"), a spelling reform that uses a combination of punctuation and letters to make visible together both grammatical genders (see below for examples).

Specifically regarding innovative forms for gender nonconforming representation, queer theorists and linguists have proposed options to the French third-person singular and plural subject pronouns. In such a model of pronoun usage, the traditional *il/elle* ("he/she/it,"

singular) and *ils/elles* ("they, masculine/feminine plural) are joined by forms such as *iel* and *iels* which are gender nonbinary and which also index the traditional forms (Swami & Mackenzie, 2019). Significantly, those non-traditional forms *sound* distinct from the traditional ones, which is not always true in the pronunciation of written gender inclusive forms. The debate about forms continues, but the visibility of normative and non-normative forms in legitimized texts offers a learning opportunity that some teachers in France are taking up.

Motivated by Océane's question about trans/nonbinary language use in French, I developed a lesson for my first-year students in how to describe people using both standard and gender-inclusive language. I reframed Océane's query as an essential question motivating this curricular innovation: *How do we describe ourselves and others in written French using both standard and gender-inclusive language?* This lesson taught first-year students of French how to describe people using both standard and gender-inclusive language. The two-day lesson came after students had learned and practiced the verb of being, *être*, in the present indicative tense with personal pronoun subjects, and it marked the beginning of instruction on adjective forms. It is in these forms that gender difference can be marked alongside number.[6]

I asked students to reflect first on written model sentences, guessing the gender of the provided adjectives. In order for them to do that, I used English cognates for the adjectives and subject pronouns as well as well-known teachers in our school as grammatical subjects. Using their textbooks and more model sentences, students then considered traditional ways to write plural adjectives that corresponded to mixed gender subjects, which defaulted to a masculine plural form in standard French writing. I then presented models of plural adjectives that used *l'écriture inclusive*. It was in encountering these forms that students began to imagine ways to write about any person. As we examined the normative and non-normative forms together, I asked students to reflect on the different written forms by using these questions: *What do you notice? Why might some people choose to write with the different forms?*

For instance, in a traditional grammatical sentence, the masculine plural is the default form:

Les élèves sont intelligents (The pupils are intelligent).

The 's' on *les*, *élèves*, and *intelligents* marks the plural, but, if there are girls in the group of pupils, their presence is effaced in this structure. An addition of an 'e' before the 's' in *intelligentes* would mark it as feminine plural but would erase the boys in the group. *L'écriture inclusive* calls for a non-normative writing that makes both genders visible (and therefore included):

Les élèves sont intelligent.e.s.

The use of the period highlights each morpheme, beginning with the masculine, followed by the feminine, and ending with the plural. This basic exploration of *l'écriture inclusive* is to suggest a written linguistic flexibility[7] in the system that becomes useful for all language users, but specifically for those who wish to express trans/non-normative gender.

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[6] Exceptions to this grammatical rule are found in invariable adjectives, where the masculine and feminine form is the same, most often marked by a silent final *e* (e.g., *rouge, magique, riche*) or as a descriptor derived from a noun, especially from animals, flowers, and fruits (e.g., *marron, pastel, châtain*). Additionally, French adjectives borrowed from other languages rarely follow agreement rules (e.g., *cool, kitsch, snob, trash*).

[7] In speaking, however, it is unclear what the pronunciation is: Does it default to a sounding of the /t/, which traditionally indicates agreement with a feminine antecedent? Does a speaker say both the masculine (silent /t/) and feminine (sounded /t/) forms sequentially? There is not yet any consensus about pronunciation.

In considering how language users who identify as nonbinary might use written French to represent themselves, the punctuated style of *l'écriture inclusive* is informative. For example, writers can retain the standard first-person subject pronoun and verb but adapt the adjective form: *Je suis intelligent.e.* That side-by-side visibility of the final *t* and *e* highlights the inclusion of *both* the masculine *and* the feminine. Together, in learning about normative and non-normative gender forms, language users encounter symbolic possibility through their selection of a form that might more closely represent them, not one that is assigned to them.

The next step in my instruction was presenting some of the discussion around these forms and their use in parts of the French-speaking world. Specifically, students read two articles from the Anglophone media that presented different stances around the use of non-normative forms in French (or, in the articles, "gender neutral" language). These articles (see Elmiger, 2017; Samuel, 2017; Timist, 2017 in References section) provided a historical and sociopolitical context of the students' language study; indeed, for many of my students, this was the first time that they read about and discussed openly the politics of language use. To support their reading and classroom discussion of the articles, they completed a graphic organizer that employed critical inquiry (see Appendix).

On the second day of this close study, after a warm-up review of the different forms, we used their reflections on the readings to think about their own choice of forms. In using a set of cloze and sentence-completion exercises, students worked together to supply all possible answers and explained their reasoning behind their choices. Additionally, groups of students used images of people and created short, descriptive sentences using the *subject + être + adjective* structure. This activity allowed student creativity in subject and adjective selection form. After creating their sentences, students wrote an individual reflection about the forms they chose (*What do they show grammatically? Why did you select those?*) and documented any questions they still had. If they believed that more than one form were possible, they needed to explain the potential contexts, subjects, and audiences for whom those forms were acceptable. In this way, students were neither discarding traditional gender grammar nor applying it uncritically; they were developing their linguistic repertoire while also developing their critical awareness around language.

Thus far in my classes, I have encountered only one non-binary student at my current site, but I find that *l'écriture inclusive* is popular with my students across the grade levels. For instance, in sample paragraphs on a written exam of a recent second-year French class of 20 students, 12 students used *l'écriture inclusive* correctly in the plural, according to the semantic-level function of representing mixed gender groups of people. Their writing did not reflect any use of the singular forms of *l'écriture inclusive*, which might seem less applicable to them since they wrote about individuals whose gender they knew.

DISCUSSION

Océane's question from the students' first year in secondary school has never left me. I internalized it as more than an informational query; it was more broadly about visibility, inclusivity, and equity. Students who are seen, included, and have equal access in class have a stronger probability of succeeding personally and academically. Moreover, those aspects are central to the struggle of LGBTQIA individuals wishing to integrate and empower themselves in majority society.

Inserting non-standard ways to understand and apply grammatical gender in relationship to people opens up the art of possibility in the L2 French classroom. For the instructor, one possibility is introducing and providing examples of linguistic variation in the classroom in a very concrete way. Through guided instruction, individual study, and group reflection, students can make informed choices about the linguistic variables that they can choose to use in different contexts for different purposes, practicing first in a classroom that recognizes the visibility of all forms. For instance, after thorough instruction and practice with standard French usage of binary grammatical gender, students can identify the traditional contexts in which the standard language is important. Next, students can propose contexts and circumstances in which the use of inclusive language might provoke negative reactions and in which it might evoke positive response, keeping in mind that linguistic change always involves some degree of discomfort. Their enriched knowledge of communication that includes gender inclusive forms provides additional options to L2 users to use language symbolically to include all, especially individuals whose gender identity does not correspond neatly or symmetrically with an either-or model of gender. In the end, L2 users' educated choice regarding gender representation in language empowers everyone through new and necessary ways in which all language users (students and instructors) can represent themselves and others.

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APPENDIX

Analyzing Texts Critically

1. Restate the thesis, or main argument, in your own words. What is the most important idea + opinion?
2. Find at least one question about which you would like more information.
3. What have you noticed or observed in the text? Language (body)? Who speaks? Who does not speak?

4. Make a comparison or a contrast to something you already know or have experienced in your life.
5. What seems to be missing or not answered in the text?
6. Offer a critique or evaluation of the text. (How) is it useful or interesting?