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Embracing écriture inclusive Students Respond to Gender Inclusivity in the French Language Classroom

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Embracing *écriture inclusive*
Students Respond to Gender Inclusivity in the French Language Classroom

Introduction

Happenings and Beginnings

2017 was a tumultuous year for the French language with the publishing of the first gender-inclusive textbook written in French. Published by Editions Hatier, the textbook, entitled *Questionner le monde* ("Questioning the World"), enhanced an already complex dialogue surrounding *écriture inclusive* or inclusive language. Initially, the incorporation of *écriture inclusive* was designed with the goal of creating a greater sense of gender equality for feminine identifying people within the French language. However, more recent pushes have also begun to include the goals of queer activitists and academics by increasing visibility and making space for non-binary French-speaking people. Bringing this dialogue forward, the textbook and movements supporting *écriture inclusive* received significant pushback from the French Prime Minister, Édouard Phillipe, as well as the French Academy who dictates official language changes.

In response to this rejuvenated support for the implementation of inclusive French,[1] Phillipe took governmental action by banning the use of inclusive French in official documents in the country (Glosswitch 2017). In addition to Phillipe's ban, the French Academy published a public declaration in regard to inclusive French saying that "cette aberration 'inclusive'" (this "inclusive" aberration) is putting the French language "en péril mortel" (in mortal danger)

[1] For example, Éliane Viennot, a French feminist academic and activist headed a petition to stop teaching the generic masculine in French schools that was signed by 314 French teachers in 2017 (Burrows-Taylor, 2017)

("Déclaration de l'Académie française sur l'écriture dite 'inclusive'" 2017, *my own translation*). But more troubling was one of the questions the Academy posed: "Il est déjà difficile d'acquérir une langue, qu'en sera-t-il si l'usage y ajoute des formes secondes et altérées?" (It is already difficult to learn a language, what will happen if we add secondary and altered forms [to French]?) ("Déclaration de l'Académie française sur l'écriture dite 'inclusive'" 2017, *my own translation*). It is because of this question that I decided to develop this project.

During the past year, Dr. Kiki Kosnick (a French and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies professor at Augustana College), myself, and two other student researchers have been working to develop open-access inclusive teaching materials including lessons, worksheets, and instructional videos for French classes. Through this work with my peers and Dr. Kosnick, it came to my attention that the question the French Academy had posed was problematic. That is not to say that there are no challenges in teaching, learning, and (hopefully) standardizing this linguistic need, but rather, that the fear of the French Academy (that learners of French would find the language more difficult to learn and speak if *écriture inclusive* was standardized) disregards the voices of real young people. If the French Academy is going to use future generations of French speakers as leverage against *écriture inclusive* then it is important to give voice to these young people.

With this in mind, the goal of this paper and research is to demonstrate the realities of teaching and learning *écriture inclusive* at a 100 level, in which students have little to no prior knowledge of the French language. I pull theoretical perspectives from multiple fields of thought including linguistic anthropology, second language acquisition, queer pedagogy studies, gender studies, and feminist literature to contextualize my ethnographic findings and claims. I argue that

écriture inclusive has a clear place within French language pedagogy and did not inhibit the learning of the students in Dr. Kosnick's French class. Rather, I posit that the incorporation of this pedagogical element enhanced the classroom environment.

Methods, Goals, and Structure

During a fourteen week period, I observed one of Dr. Kosnick's 100 level French classes two days a week employing participant observation and semi-structured interviews as my main forms of data collection. During this period of observation, I was able to watch how students gradually incorporated *écriture inclusive* into their learning of French as I engaged in and helped with classroom activities. Of the twelve students in the class, interviews were conducted with seven of them. During these interviews, I asked questions designed to gauge each student's past experience with French, past experience thinking about gender, reactions to what they were learning, the classroom environment, and the usage of these inclusive grammatical tools. While I had no criteria that would affect recruitment within the classroom, it is important to note that participating in an interview did count toward attendance requirements at the department French Table[2] that were a portion of each student's grade in the class. My setting is also important to consider, as a potential limit to this project, in that my results will be focused specifically on an American liberal arts language classroom. Without the standardization of *écriture inclusive* in France or another French speaking country, there is no foundation to compare how or when a native French speaker would learn this grammatical component in the classroom. I would

[2] French Table is a space for students to work with peer leaders to practice speaking, reading out loud, and listening skills.

encourage more studies to be done within the confines of an American French language classroom as well as in language classrooms in French-speaking countries.

Throughout my paper, in an attempt to disrupt traditional academic writing in which the gender of authors, peers, and research participants may be assumed, I have decided to use no gender identifiers. When discussing literature, I will simply use the last name of the author. In cases where I am discussing my interviewees, I will be utilizing "proper pronouns,"[3] an idea developed by Dr. Kosnick and Professor Vickie Phipps, a graphic design professor at Augustana. In addition to this, I also attempt to disrupt traditional academic assumptions by putting the voices of the students I interviewed in dialogue with the literature surrounding this topic. Their thoughts, ideas, and opinions will be sewed into discussion of the facts and theory presented by scholars. As some of the participants of this project were not native English speakers, I would also like to note that in centering the voices of students, I purposefully do not alter any interview transcript material. Because of this, some transcription segments that I include may not always line up with what is considered grammatically, syntactically, or lexically correct in English.

In the first section of this paper, "Language in Conversation," I will be covering the topics that are most pertinent within the literature surrounding inclusive language. This includes discussions of the structure of the French language, the gender-inclusive options that are currently present, the role of linguistic gender from a social perspective, and how all of this can impact higher education. The second section of this paper, "Inside the French 101 Classroom," takes on a narrative tone and follows the themes that came up most frequently in student

[3] In using "proper pronouns" rather than using pronouns like she/her and he/him, I will simply use the first letter of a participant's name ("Proper Pronoun"). For example, I might say: "Elizabeth had a sandwich for lunch today, E didn't like it very much." More information can be found on Professor Phipps webpage: https://vickierphipps.com/proper-pronoun/

interviews about the subject. In this section, I also dissect some of the realities of teaching and learning *écriture inclusive* within this classroom.

Language in Conversation

Language Structure and Gender-Inclusive Options

Pushes for *écriture inclusive* bring to the forefront questions about the structure of the French language in relation to gender. Like many other romance languages, French is a grammatical gender language. This means that every non-human noun and dependent form[4] have gender markers (Stahlberg et al. 2007). For example, in French the word table, *la table,* has the feminine article *la* attached to it. However, French also, grammatically, has natural gender—meaning that the culturally associated gender of the animate (usually human) referent will match the gender used grammatically (Stahlberg et al. 2007, Hord 2016).[5] While grammatical gender can be problematic and should be actively disrupted, it is natural gender in French that can negatively impact non-binary speakers as it uses grammar to apply a culturally normalized binary gender system.

Even though the French language is structured in a way that can make inclusive language more difficult to achieve, there are several options for non-binary French speakers that have been devised as part of *écriture inclusive*. For example, the most well-known gender-neutral

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[4] Dependent forms include articles (the, a/an), adjectives (small, loud, happy, etc.), and pronouns (I/she/we/they).

[5] Natural gender takes several forms in French. It might look like the use of feminine and masculine articles to imply the gender of "mother" and "father" in french (*la mère, le père)* or it could be the combined use of a pronoun/natural gender noun and agreeing adjective/adverb (*Eloise, elle est intelligente* - Eloise, she is intelligent).

third-person pronoun in French currently is *iel*. *Iel* (*Iels* in the plural) is a phonetic combination of the masculine third-person, *il,* and the feminine third-person, *elle* (Kosnick 2019). While *iel* is not the only gender-neutral third-person pronoun in French,[6] it is the most popular, and the pronoun that I will be focusing on in discussions of *écriture inclusive*.

However, there can be some complexities when using *iel* mainly in response to the generic masculine. In French, this is mainly situated in the third-person plural standardized pronouns *ils* and *elles*. When there is a group of all masculine-identifying people, grammatically, *ils* would be used. When there is a group of all feminine-identifying people, grammatically, *elles* would be used. When there is a mixed gender group, grammatically, no matter the ratio, the mascuilne, *ils*, is always used. This is the case for agreeing adjectives as well. Because *iel* acts as a neutral third-person pronoun, many have suggested the use of *iels* as the plural third-person pronoun to be used in situations where mixed gender groups are being described. However, that would mean that the pronoun would no longer be reserved for the visibility of non-binary French speakers.

Before the proposal of *iel*, feminist activists began to push for the addition of *le point milieu*—the middot or midpoint. This is the aspect of *écriture inclusive* that the French Academy is responding to in their declaration. Initially proffered as a tool to push back against the generic masculine, now, *le point milieu* has also become a strategy for non-binary French-speaking people. This linguistic trend inserts a dot in between the masculine and feminine endings of

[6] Blogger alexentousgenres (2017) provides a thorough list of what pronouns other speakers in the community are using. For example, some non-binary French speakers might use *ul, ol, or ael* if *iel* seems too close to *il* or *elle*. alexentousgenres also notes that some speakers who identify somewhat with the feminine and masculine might use *im, em, ille, or el* as pronouns as they are closer to *il* and *elle* while still pushing back against the two traditionally gendered pronouns ("Les genres non-binaires: introduction", 2017).

adjectives and nouns. For example, if I wanted to say: Charles, Veronique, and Anaïs are tired today, I would say *Charles, Veronique, et Anaïs sont* ***fatigué•e•s*** *aujourd'hui.* This disrupts the standard of just using *fatigués* (the masculine plural form of the adjective). This can also be used for more complex adjectives, however it can get messy.[7] There are also times when *le point milieu* can be used for nouns. For example, if I was explaining that Charles, Veronique, and Anaïs are my friends, I mights say, *Charles, Veronique, et Anaïs sont mes* ***ami•e•s*** instead of *amis*. When speech comes into play, *le point milieu* can become even more complicated. Since *fatigué,* and *fatiguée* are pronounced the same, saying *fatigué•e* is less of an issue as it can follow the same pronunciation rules. But for other words like *petit* and *petite* where the pronunciation differs, *petit•e* can be tricky. Jamie, one of the students I interviewed, spoke on this topic discussing some of J's struggles with French and, specifically, using *écriture inclusive*. Jamie had already expressed to me that J felt very comfortable using *iel,* especially since it was integrated into J's learning as just another third-person pronoun. However, J did express worry surrounding *le point milieu*: "The only difficult part is obviously...the words that, like you have to use the dot e and, like, pronunciations, all that." Where *iel* is naturally integrated into the language learning environment as a consistent grammatical option, *le point milieu* is more difficult to incorporate as its accessibility in spoken French is often limited. As Jamie noted, pronunciation is a big issue. A student may master using *le point milieu* with simple adjectives at the 100 level, but the moment there is an attempt to use it in speech, depending on the adjective, the student can be left hanging.

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[7] For example, if I wanted to use *le point milieu* with the adjectives *heureux* and *heureuse* (the masculine and feminine forms translating to happy, respectively) a proposed *heureux•se.*

There are also linguistic moves that can be made outside of grammatical additions and changes to a standardized French. One of these moves is circumlocution, in which speakers are able to avoid using natural gender markers while still using the standardized forms of the language. Therefore, since using *le point milieu* becomes difficult when speech comes into play, speakers have another option available to disrupt binary gender (Kosnick 2019). In "The Everyday Poetics of Gender-Inclusive French: Strategies for Navigating the Linguistic Landscape," Dr. Kosnick (2019) notes the use of circumlocution could be understood by a wider audience, but also, that it would perhaps be easier for the Academy to stomach: "Neologisms are arguably more creative and, potentially, more threatening to the Académie" (8). However, Dr. Kosnick does not suggest that French speakers simply push aside more direct non-binary language that is available in order to soley focus on indirect inclusive moves. Rather, Dr. Kosnick, pulling from visuals designed by French blogger alexentousgenres (2017),[8] argues that these tools can both allow for direct linguistic representation of non-binary idenities while still providing options that will be understood by a variety of French-speaking populations.

Language, Culture, and Identity

Psychology graduate student, A. J. Shroy, brings to the discussion of gender inclusive language the idea of gender belief systems. Shroy cites social psychologists, Stahlberg et al., (2007) who explain these systems to be the social and cultural ideas that inform how to refer to individuals of different genders within a language community. Shroy expands this idea by

[8] See "Le Neutre à l'oral" https://entousgenresblog.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/quels-pronoms-neutres-en-francais-et-comment-les-utiliser/

examining the ways that these systems can, in turn, reinforce constructed understandings of gender as a binary. However, these systems, according to Shroy, also exist outside of language structure. “Language,” Shroy says, “is not only a means of information transfer, but also a vessel for maintaining social categories and hierarchies held by the speech community” (9).

One interviewee, Sunny, discusses a similar idea in investigating how French supports the gender binary. Sunny was very excited to have these discussions and work through what S had been processing in French class.

> And…[in the French language] the way that we describe people...it aligns with like, binary gender...gender’s huge in the way that we refer to things? But not necessarily...gender identity?...it creates issues in the way that we refer to people...there’s a disconnect…

It is clear here, that Sunny is able to distinguish between the role that gender plays when discussing non-human versus human nouns in French. S is quick to note that the whole structure supports a gender binary, but that the biggest issues come from trying to talk about people within this limited language structure. In our discussion, Sunny goes on to say that there is a lack of vocabulary and language to talk about non-binary people in the French language. This “disconnect” and “lack” acts as a reinforcement, as Shroy noted, of these gender categories.

Linguistic anthropologists, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, also build on the idea of hierarchy within language through an analysis of markedness. Being marked means existing outside of a societal norm, or being identified as deviant (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). Bucholtz and Hall continue, emphasizing that “marked identities are also ideologically associated with marked language; linguistic structures or practices that differ from the norm” (372). *Écriture inclusive* is a perfect example of how marked language functions. *Iel*—which is already a linguistic minority—is associated with both the feminist and queer communities in France. Both of these

groups are already marked as they challenge existing norms. This marks *iel* and other proponents of *écriture inclusive* while at the same time reinforcing the markedness of the aforementioned communities. Even *le point milieu* acts as a visible mark that can put the writer outside of a linguistic norm, though this is gradually changing. In this way, the gender hierarchies that Shroy as well as Bucholtz and Hall describe are simultaneously recreated and supported.

While people who exist outside of linguistically marginalized communities may not feel these constraints, for those who do experience them, learning a language that actively supports these limitations can be very difficult. Linguistic anthropologist, Stanton Wortham (2008), discusses the role that social factors like linguistic hierarchies play in the lives of language learners in the classroom. "When educators and students speak and write, they signal things not only about the subject matter they are learning but also about their affiliations with social groups both inside and outside the speech event. These affiliations...can both influence how students learn…[and] shape their life trajectories" (Wortham 2008, 39). When these affiliations reinforce hierarchies they work directly against the identities of some students. Madeleine del Caño (2019), a language student at the State University of New York, explores the consequences of this in "Language, Queerly Phrased: A Sociolinguistic Examination of non-binary Gender Identity in French." Del Caño argues that traditional understandings of gender as binary "erases dynamics" that inform how we understand the relationship between gender and language use. According to del Caño, "This presents a very different question to non-binary francophone speakers: when everything from a pen to a table is gendered how can you be the one exception to a language's entire structure?" (2019, 15). To del Caño, reinforcing the binary through language is what fuels claims that gender inclusive pronouns like *iel* are "unfrenchy" or do not belong in

the language—del Caño sees these claims as an attempt to protect the proposed authenticity of a binary French language.

Linda D. Wayne—who writes a call for an increased use of English gender-neutral language in “Neutral pronouns: A Modest Proposal Whose Time Has Come”—shares a similar point of view about linguistic authenticity. For Wayne, when the authenticity of gender-neutral pronouns is questioned by sources of authority (such as Édouard Phillipe and the French Academy) normativity is reinstated and so is the protection of a socially constructed gender binary. “Thus,” Wayne says, “people who do not conform to a rigid two-sex system are relegated to the discursive purgatory of *non-signification”* (2005, 87). This “non-signification” exists within the available standardized grammar within the language as well. In an analysis of the novel, *Sphinx*, by Anne F. Garréta—a French novel that successfully includes gender-neutral language and characters, including the protagonist—Dr. Kosnick notes that there are only two tenses that the narrator in Garréta’s novel is able to use other than the present, the imperfect and the simple past.[9] Dr. Kosnick explains: “The non-binary narrator must, a priori, operate within the constraints of both the *imparfait* (imperfect!) and the *passé simple* (complicated!)...” (2019, 15). Before this, however, Dr. Kosnick argues that this extends outside of the novel to non-binary speakers of French as a whole. In other words, a non-binary person can only exist with limited linguistic boundaries.

Julie Byrd Clark, a Canadian ESL (English as a Second Language) educator, discusses a way that some Canadian schools have been trying to rethink linguistic boundaries to include a

[9] The imperfect tense in French is used to describe ongoing or uncompleted past events. The simple past, however, acts in the same way as the French preterite but is only used in formal writing. Neither of these tenses require gendered agreements.

wider variety of identities that students may have.[10] While Clark specifically focuses on students who may have differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds, I find that it is also applicable to discussions of gender as a social identity. Clark opens the paper by discussing some of the limitations to Canadian FLP (French Language Pedagogy): "...current policy and pedagogical practice do not reflect nor recognize the different linguistic varieties of languages with which these youth have had contact, and which make up or form part of their linguistic repertoire(s), nor do they reflect their multiple social identities (or ways of identifying)" (2012, 144). What particularly stands out in Clark's analysis is the support given to varied linguistic "repertoire(s)." Thinking about *écriture inclusive*, could teaching and learning it be thought of as another factor to add to a linguistic repertoire? Teaching these ideas in this way would encourage students not only to expand their knowledge of French, but start to actively engage with gender-inclusive language.

Two participants discussed the idea of expanding a classroom's knowledge and linguistic capabilities, or "repertoires," when it comes to *écriture inclusive*. For Bailey, incorporating *écriture inclusive* into the language was a matter of equality. Bailey was very reserved, but laughed easily. B seemed a little nervous to discuss some of the topics that were brought up in the interview but made sure to answer everything as fully as possible. In our discussion, B said: "if your pronouns don't fit into a language, you feel excluded from that, and...you don't necessarily have a place? And I think that...it's how we represent ourselves everyday...everyone should be able to communicate *about* themselves in an easy way..." In Bailey's opinion, expanding linguistic repertoires to include a wider array of pronouns and linguistic trends in

[10] Canada, a francophone country, has been a leader in standardizing a wider variety of gender-inclusive language than is available in France and other francophone countries.

French was a necessary step in improving the classroom and making space for French speakers of all gender identities. For Harlee, however, the expansion of language repertoires was an action to increase tolerance and visibility. When asked about the value of having open discussions regarding inclusion, Harlee expressed: “I think it’s very significant because there might be some kids who just don’t know. And if you just show them the kind of problem it is, or, show them just how many people are affected by it, so many more people would be open minded to getting the problem resolved...” In increasing awareness, and expanding understanding of the identities represented in newly presented inclusive linguistic trends, Harlee proposes a more energized role from other students. This active role of inclusive language learning and use tied into Bailey’s argument surrounding linguistic accessibility creates a renewed concept of the role of the language student. Rather than passively interacting with the language options presented, both Bailey and Harlee propose a more active role for the student that includes an engagement with *écriture inclusive* on an individual level, such as asking questions.

Higher Education

Because language learning is often a part of higher education for many students, it is important to consider the ways that these classrooms can add to existing marginalization or make spaces for the visibility and inclusion of non-binary students. One of the students I interviewed, Gretchen, had been thinking about the relationship between gender and language both before and during our interview. In this instance, G discussed a need for a sense of safety and belonging in order to thrive in and beyond the classroom. “But...speaking on inclusion...if you don’t feel included, and you get pushed out in the world, it’s very likely that you’re going to isolate

yourself...It's...really restricting, it limits people's potential." For Gretchen, whether or not an individual feels included can make or break their future. In Gretchen's point of view, because the classroom is where a lot of self-transformation and self-identification happens (as G noted at one point: "It's important to be able to stand up in front of a class, in front of people you don't know, and say 'This is who I am, and you can learn to get to know me.'") when limits are placed upon how students can act (and ultimately identify), these constraints are extended beyond the classroom.

According to higher education professional, Eleanor Ford Finger (2010), in college, non-binary students need to feel a basic sense of safety and security in order to allow their education to flourish.[11] While Finger is focused on the generalized campus, the same ideas can be applied to individual classrooms. For Finger, language plays a key role in how a sense of safety can be achieved. While there are physical changes that can be made to a campus to promote the safety and security of non-binary students, it is also important to implement linguistic and social changes as well. Language is a powerful tool—it can both reinforce binaries and alter perceptions of identity (Finger 2010). It is up to institutions of higher education—administration and faculty, especially—to utilize this power in a positive, inclusive way such as through an on-campus standardization of *écriture inclusive* in the French classroom. Finger asks: "The question for higher education is whether environments are being created that

[11] Finger expands drawing on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: "If basic needs are met, such as food, shelter, and support, then a sense of security and safety are established with the student trusting the institution and feeling motivated to stay. This sense builds on itself as relationships unfold with friends, faculty, and staff to establish a feeling of belonging and institutional affiliation. Trans students, who are self-conscious or still unclear about their gender identity and are betwixt and between, could isolate themselves as a defense mechanism so institutions need to be intentional about the outreach and welcome that are extended to gender-variant students" (2010, 32)

recognize and encourage...all aspects of identity. Is there truly room for everyone? How does language communicate who behaves? Language will continue to impose meanings, particularly through binaries, that recognize privilege, power and difference" (2010, 107). Will institutions of higher education continue this trend?[12]

Perhaps the first step in acheiving this is through the introduction of queer pedagogy into language classrooms. According to João Nemi Neto, queer theory, which informs this pedagogy, actively pushes back against social norms related to gender and sexuality. Therefore, "Queer pedagogy...seeks to contribute to practices of education, analyzing the fluidity and the mobility of sociey and affirming that educational institutions should not attach themselves to one set model, since these ideals end up alienating, even excluding, certain individuals" (Neto 2016, 591). Employing this pedagogical practice in the language classroom makes space to question the norms within language structures, cultural values, the materials used for teaching, and what is and is not taught in the classroom. This emphasis on critical thinking surrounding normativity then encourages equality and acceptance within the classroom (Neto 2016).

A queer world language professor, Neto works first hand with these ideas and implements them in the classroom. Neto argues that exclusion begins in world language classrooms the moment that students do not have the words to talk about their identities, noting that, often times, aspects of identity surrounding gender and seuxality are not even brought up to begin with:

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[12] Alice Omaggio Hadley notes that considering the varying identities of each learner within a classroom creates a stronger language-learning experience. "Many also believe that learner factors such as age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality, cognitive style, and preferred learning strategies need to be considered in any comprehensive theory of second-language acquisition" (Hadley 2001, 75). Add to this gender, race, and sexuality, and a world language professor can significantly increase the amount of students reached each lesson, especially when teaching a language, like French, that makes little room for non-binary students.

> A queer lens is necessary in foreign language instruction. What this would mean is an unsubordinated perspective, a questioning and attentive lens to the students who end up not being represented in the pages of books and go unheard and unseen in the classroom setting. It is important to note that this queer perspective does not only turn to LGBTQIA questions, but also to the most diverse family formations such as female-headed households, a common phenomenon in different cultures. (Neto 2016, 600)

There are students made invisible in the world language classroom that could easily be given more visibility simply by having discussions that encourage students to question the values perpetuated by the language that is being taught. For example, both Sunny and Harlee critique the textbook that is used in class for not making enough space to discuss under-represented identities and supporting the gendered assumptions made by students based on characters presented in the book. In K's article, Dr. Kosnick suggests that, especially for upper-level language learners, the use of narrative texts can be a tool for teaching this kind of pedagogy, especially with a focus on inclusive language. One of the examples that Dr. Kosnick explores, as already mentioned, is Garréta's *Sphinx*. By bringing this novel into the classroom, students are encouraged to synthesize in discussions questions about identity while participating in language learning. This actively pulls Neto's classroom culture of questioning— that is so central to queer pedagogy—into the learning space in a way that engages students on multiple levels (narrative evokes emotion and authenticity, the text itself is a demonstration of grammar, and a text like *Sphinx* holds relevant cultural information). By incorporating queer pedagogy into the world language classroom and creating a space where students can ask questions, professors can ensure the sense of safety, described by Finger, that is necessary to help non-binary students feel comfortable and visible. In the next section, we will see how Dr. Kosnick employs a significant

amount of these tactics in the classroom and the responses of students to these pedagogical techniques as well as the active space made for *écriture inclusive*.

Inside the French 101 Classroom: Teaching and Learning *écriture inclusive*

Setting the Scene

It was a Wednesday like any other: notably long. Except, as my day started to come to an end, my research was only beginning. I opened the door to Denkmann Hall and felt the sharp slap of the air conditioning immediately turning to walk down the narrow stairway into the basement. I did not realize that some of the faces I was passing were the faces of students I would come to know well. A common space in the world language building, the basement was swarming with students: backpacks bumping, the constant pounding of a river of feet moving up and down the stairs, yells and greetings from across the room of “Hey! How was your summer!”.

The basement of Denkmann is more like a catacomb than a space for education, especially where the 100-level world language classes are held. I managed to push my way through the crowd and into the cavernous, white, brick tunnels at the back of the common space. At this point, all hope for a phone signal was lost. I remember all too well having my own French classes down there during my first year on campus. You get upgraded to the (significantly more welcoming) second floor after a certain number of classes in the program. Walk straight, take a left turn, walk straight again, another left turn, a few more paces forward and, finally, one turn to the right. By the time I had gotten to the classroom where my research would take place, a handful of students were already in their seats with their backs to me.

At that point, none of them knew who I was so they either thought I had wandered into the wrong room for class, or I, in bad form, had missed the first day of class the day before. I received some confused glances as I chose my seat in the back and started unpacking my things. A little too eager, I precariously managed to balance my laptop, a notebook, a folder, and a water bottle on the tiny desk surface. I was ready to take copious amounts of notes.

Figure 1

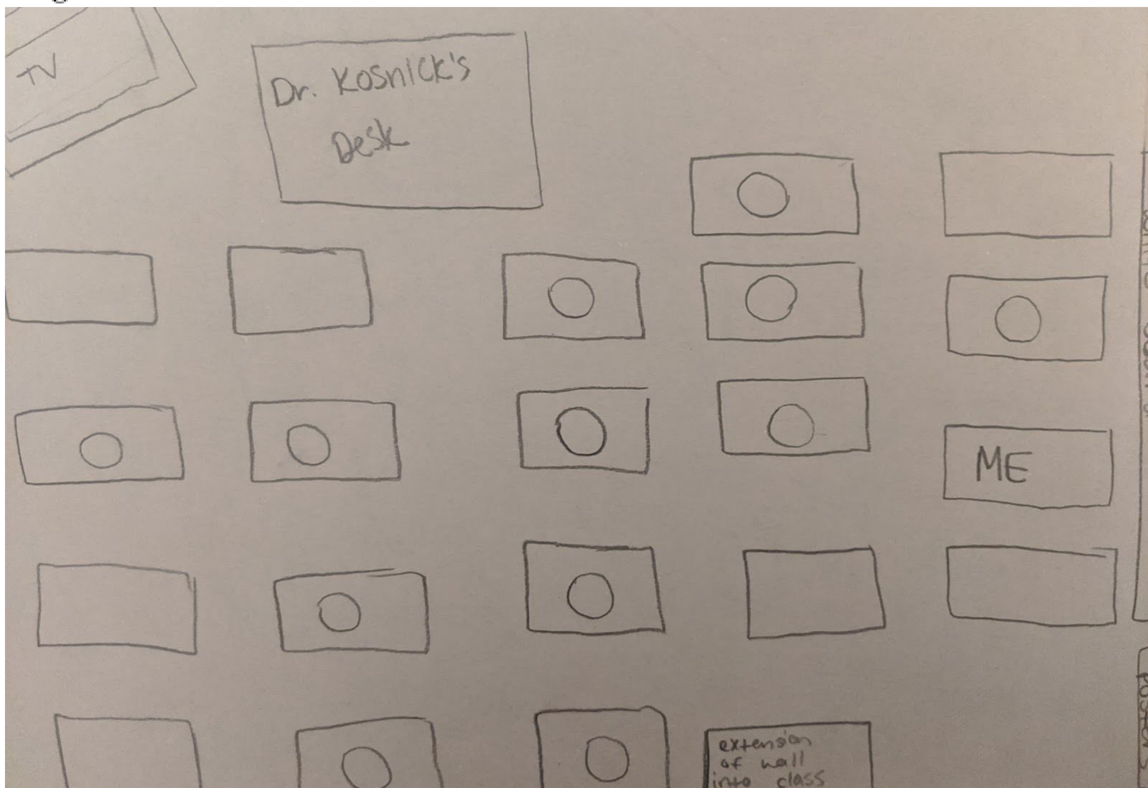


Figure 1 shows a rough map of the French classroom. Each circle represents a student.

Surveying the room, I noticed that all of the white boards were covered in writing about queer identitities, what identity means, and the kinds of identities that exist. I was shocked, to say the least, but was excited that I immediately had some visual data to take notes on. I knew Dr.

Kosnick wanted to talk about identities and inclusion, but I did not think that these 100-level French students would be learning in-depth queer theory in this class. As I typed furiously, Dr. Kosnick rushed in, arms full of papers, with an enthusiastic "Bonjour!". A chorus of greetings rang through the room in response and with that the class period had started.

I would learn later that day that the notes on the board were from Dr. Kosnick's previous class, Queer Theory, and not for the French 101 class. I was about to delete my notes about them when I realized that even if this was not discussed in class, students were still able to engage with these ideas in a passive way just by reading them on the board. The notes, while unintentional, acted as a precursor to that as well as many other class periods.

As I got to know the class better, I would discover more about the students' identities. There were 12 students in the class, most of whom had different majors with all but two being first-year students. They had varying reasons to take French including a personal interest in the language, a potential future major, and meeting the college's language requirement. However, several of these students had studied French before. But almost *none* of them had discussed inclusivity in a world language class before.

Coming to Terms with Inclusive Language in French

While many of the students in Dr. Kosnick's class had not discussed inclusion in a world language setting before, they did have previous exposure to discussions of gender and inclusion outside of the classroom. Based on student responses from a questionnaire I handed out at the beginning of the research process, there were only two students (of the eleven who responded) who did not explicitly state that they had interacted with non-binary language before. Students

were interacting with the cultural and social implications of inclusive language through relationships with friends and family without being taught about it in a classroom setting. Because of this, many students went through a coming to terms process in which they used their social and cultural understanding of a North American, English interpretation of gender-language relations (for international students this was different) to process what that looks like in French.

Bailey, for example, expressed concern at learning about the realities of inclusive language in French following a similar theme to B's other responses: equality. B takes a similar approach when coming to terms with inclusive language in French:

> I had gone learning...the first two years [of high school French]...using those [binary] pronouns...I didn't even...think about, like, how would [inclusive language], you know, incorporate into another language. 'Cause I've had friends that go by 'they' or 'them'...it's easy for us in English to understand, it's very easy to change that. But like in French, it, like, really shocked me...That they can't be represented in their language?

Although Bailey had taken French before Dr. Kosnick's class, it was still necessary for B to try to understand French through an English lens. In other words, using past experiences of having friends that use the English singular "they" as a pronoun helped Bailey to make connections regarding what that does or does not look like in French. Developing a connection between identity and language ("they" as a pronoun reflects a non-binary identity), Bailey's understanding of representation goes beyond a linguistic understanding that there are limited linguistic options for non-binary French speakers. It relates past relationships with non-binary folx in B's life to non-binary folx that are made invisible in French. Harlee had a similar response to that of Bailey. On the topic of the effects of learning inclusive language in a world language class, H expressed both excitement and concern.

> Well I enjoyed it. I thought it was really cool that someone was not only talking about it but talking about it globally...I remember one of my [high school] friends, like started

> telling other teachers that they wanted to, um, be addressed as *they/them* and people didn't even know where to start...I've known that it's been a problem here, but, like, it was so bizarre to me that, like, a language doesn't even have, like, the starting point.

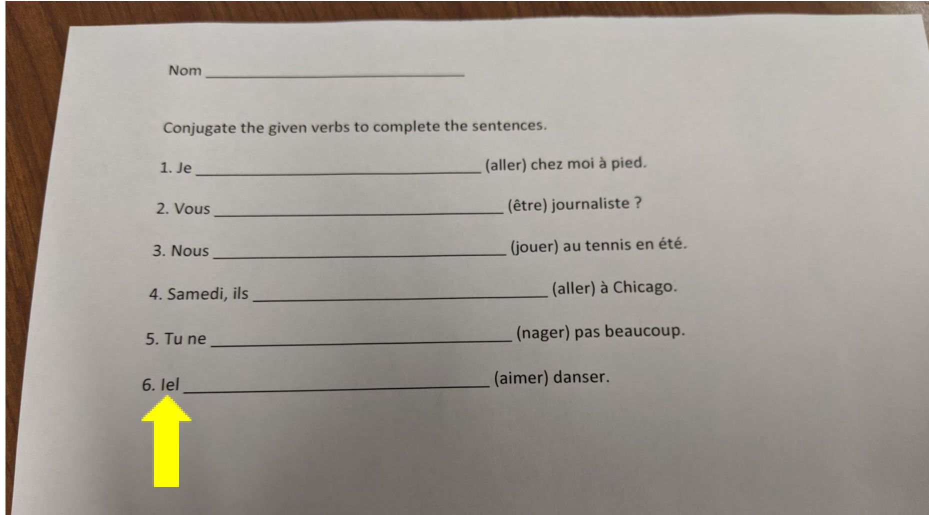
Interestingly, Harlee's description takes on a very similar structure to that of Bailey. H starts with a connection to the global, but quickly recenters to a more North American centered interpretation of inclusive language[13] connecting the two with linguistic struggles within the English language. However, the frustration in H's description of observing the reluctant responses of teachers connects to H's comment that French does not having a "starting point" for language to talk about non-binary people. The two events described, though influenced by different cultures, tie together the struggles in gaining visibility that affect the English-speaking and the French-speaking non-binary communities. While initial exposure to *écriture inclusive* in the classroom was decentering for Bailey and Harlee, their responses ultimately demonstrated that they had other resources outside of the French classroom that could be used to think about *écriture inclusive* as they were learning it.

Teaching: Dr. Kosnick's Pedagogy and Identity

In order to normalize the use of inclusive language, Dr. Kosnick embedded *écriture inclusive* into the lessons and activities done in class. For a 100-level class, this fit into the curriculum well as students learned subject pronouns, verbs, and adjectives. Photographs of some of these exercises can be seen below.

---

[13] Harlee and Bailey's North American interpretations of inclusive language in French versus in English [illegible] nportant point: a lot of the usage and attempted implementations of these newer
Figure 2 orms have remained anglocentric (Hord, 2016). The process that both of these students are working through encourages that they think critically in developing a fuller understanding of the depth of inclusive language across languages.



Nom ______________________

Conjugate the given verbs to complete the sentences.

1. Je ______________________ (aller) chez moi à pied.
2. Vous ______________________ (être) journaliste ?
3. Nous ______________________ (jouer) au tennis en été.
4. Samedi, ils ______________________ (aller) à Chicago.
5. Tu ne ______________________ (nager) pas beaucoup.
6. Iel ______________________ (aimer) danser.

Figure 2 shows an example of a quiz given out to the students. The arrow points to the integration of *iel* naturally into one of the questions. It is treated as just another third-person pronoun.

Figure 3

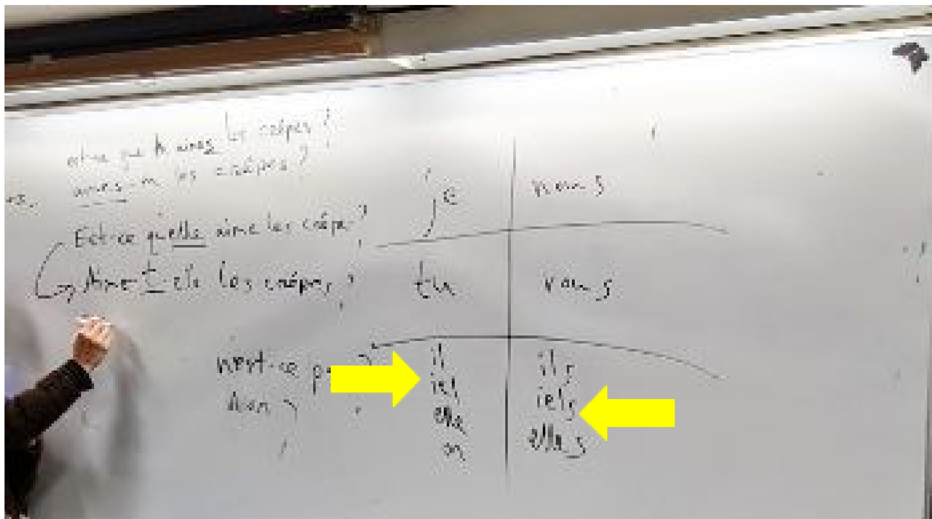


Figure 3 shows a standard subject pronoun chart in French. Here, the arrows points to the use of of *iel* and *iels* into this chart which then normalizes their presence as students are learning.

In addition to this, when learning concepts that are strongly rooted in grammatical and natural gender, students will first come in contact with them in ways that take the focus off of the self and other. For example, instead of beginning to learn adjectives when learning how to speak about the self, students are introduced to them as they learn objects. In doing this, Dr. Kosnick is able to limit gendered interpretations of adjectives until later in the course. When non-human nouns such as animals come up, that are usually interpreted with a

gender, Dr. Kosnick focuses on utilizing animals that are either always feminine or always masculine in examples. For instance, in Figure 4, Dr. Kosnick is using *une loutre,* an otter, for an example with various adjectives because that noun is always feminine even when referring to a male otter. Students already know how to create different adjective endings from working with objects, so applying them to animals is not difficult. By the time students begin applying adjectives to people, they are able to use the feminine and the masculine and only have to learn the grammatical (and social) implementation of *le point milieu*. At this level, Dr. Kosnick focuses specifically on regular adjectives since they function most efficiently with *le point milieu*. Eventually, as students become more comfortable with the language, Dr. Kosnick

Figure 4

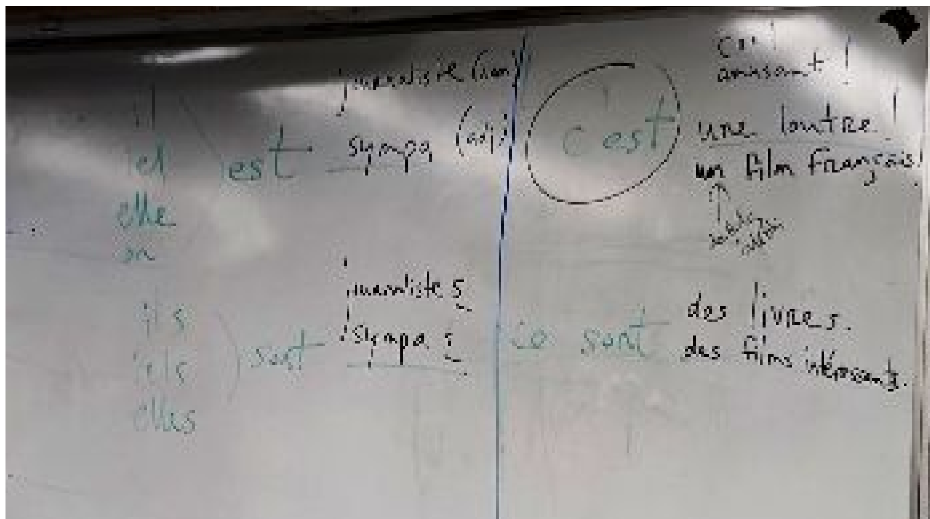


Figure 4 displays some examples given in class of learning adjectives with objects. These examples also includes, where the arrow is pointing, the use of *une loutre* as an example when learning to use adjectives with animals.

introduces phrases like *C'est une personne…* (They are a person…) and *C'est quelqu'un de…* (They are someone of...) that can be followed by an adjective while still disrupting the gender binary that would be associated with the use of *il* and *elle*.

In order to teach these ideas, extra materials needed to be developed ahead of time since most textbooks do not discuss *écriture inclusive*. For example, during one of the first weeks, Dr.

Kosnick introduced subject pronouns through a video developed by myself and two other student researchers in which we went over the grammar point with the inclusion and discussion of *iel*. Other times, Dr. Kosnick designed worksheets and activities that actively integrated *iel* into the mix. Figure 5 displays a Battleship (*Touché-Coulé)* game that Dr. Kosnick used in class to practice conjugating -er verbs. Beyond that, often Dr. Kosnick would have to make changes to exercises from the textbook (sometimes digitally annotating them in class for the students to see) to make space for more inclusive options than the textbook allowed. As the term continued, students began to take more authority by starting these conversations in class.

Figure 5

Jeu de société: Touché-Coulé

Vous avez trois navires (bateaux):
Deux de deux cases, comme ça : ☐☐
Et un de trois cases, comme ça : ☐☐☐

Placez vos navires horizontalement ou verticalement.
Inventer des phrases complètes pour trouver et détruire les navires de votre adversaire.

	Être	Avoir	Danser	Chanter	Étudier	Jouer
Je / J'						
Tu						
Il / Iel/ Elle /On						
Nous						
Vous						
Ils Iels Elles						

Figure 5 shows an in-class activity, the students were asked to play a French equivalent of Battleship. The arrows point to *iel* and *iels* which are worked into the activity allowing students to practice using them.

One event in particular comes to mind. Mid-way through the term, students were focusing on learning family terms like, mother, father, sister, and brother. On one particular day, a difficult discussion arose. Harlee, who often asked questions about inclusive language options,

raised H's hand in the front row to ask if there was a word for "sibling" in French. Dr. Kosnick paused for a moment before responding. I knew what the answer was going to be, as I remember asking previous French professors the same question. Currently in French, there is not an equivalent for "sibling" only *une sœur* (sister) and *un frère* (brother), though there have been proposed words such as *un•e frœur* that combine the two. Dr. Kosnick listed off some potential options *quelqu'un de ma famille (*someone in my family), and *un membre de ma famille* (a member of my family), trying to find the right words to give Harlee. Eventually, Dr. Kosnick explained that while these options could work, they take away from the actual relationship described when using a word like brother, sister, or sibling. Emphasizing that, unfortunately, non-binary linguistic options for family words in French are very complicated. Because Harlee started the conversation, the class was able to have a meaningful discussion about some of the limitations to *écriture inclusive* and how to work around them.

Working in tandem with the active teaching of *écriture inclusive*, Dr. Kosnick's identity as an openly non-binary person enhanced this particular classroom learning environment[14]. Both Gretchen and Harlee casually threw into conversation that they actively thought about Dr. Kosnick's identity in relation to learning and using *écriture inclusive*. For Gretchen, this occurred through actively implementing *iel* (the pronoun Dr. Kosnick uses in French) when talking about Dr. Kosnick in class. This is important as it not only demonstrates that Gretchen grasps the use of *iel* but that G is able to also think about it critically in relation to a real person's identity. On the other hand, Harlee brought up this topic while we discussed making assumptions

[14] Other than the social influence this had, Dr. Kosnick would often used K's identity as examples when teaching forms that use *iel* and *le point milieu*. This allowed students to practice using these ideas within the context of a real person's identity.

about the gender of characters in the textbook. H explained that when it comes to how to respond in that situation, H takes into account previous relationships with non-binary folx and Dr. Kosnick's as well—"...any other professor, like, I feel like they would say 'Yeah, assume.' But, like, for me as a person, and having Kiki as a professor, I don't want to assume." It is clear here that interacting with Dr. Kosnick in the classroom setting where *écriture inclusive* is taught causes Harlee to think more actively about the decisions that H makes regarding gender in a way that does not happen in other classroom settings. But it was Jamie and Bailey who spoke the most on the classroom experience in relation to Dr. Kosnick's identity.

For Jamie, having a non-binary professor teaching about inclusive language in French added a sense of authenticity to the information: "...having someone who...knows about non-binary pronouns since they themselves use non-binary pronouns...it definitely helps have that example of having someone who...wants to, like, make them a thing in like French language and all that." Because of the unsolidified nature of *écriture inclusive* in French, it is not shocking that Jamie seems to be seeking some sense of practicality and reassurance surrounding the use of this language in French. This, however, does not have to do with Jamie's comfort using this kind of language (J expressed to me that J was comfortable using this kind of language as J has used it in the past to speak about friends and actively uses Dr. Kosnick's correct pronouns in the interview and in class). Rather, in seeking authenticity, Jamie is also seeking to understand the life experiences of non-binary folx. Because *écriture inclusive* reflects non-binary speakers of French, watching a non-binary French professor using and teaching this language solidifies that reflection. For Bailey, the importance of Dr. Kosnick's identity in relation to the class does not lie in a personal understanding, but in the needs of others: "I think it makes it more comfortable

for students that may...go by those pronouns...Um, I think it might make them feel like, it's more okay to be, you know, out." For Bailey, as noted in the previous section, it is important that each student be able to take up space—for each individual identity to be allowed to exist within the classroom. Here we see this again, except this time, it is clear that Bailey is thinking about the active represenation of non-binary identities in the classroom by connecting Dr. Kosnick to the visiblity of potential non-binary students. In other words, rather than the inclusion of these students only existing in *écriture inclusive*, it also exists in the identity of the professor.

Classroom Environment: Normalizing Mistakes

In addition to the strategic pedagogy and Dr. Kosnick's non-binary identity, the French 101 classroom environment was particularly fruitful for discussions of inclusion because of a strong foundation of trust and vulnerability. This was, in part, because of the normalization of mistakes. Dr. Kosnick expands on this in one of our interviews:

> There's...an extra level of protection in working with gender in the language classroom? Because people make mistakes so often it's normalized to make mistakes. So still to be able to check 'Oh I made a mistake' but it's actually about someone's identity versus, 'I made a mistake that is about that's not how that verb is conjugated.' We're not gonna weigh? those equally, but making mistakes is normalized and it's okay...

For one student I interviewed, in particular, this was a big help: Aliyah. Aliyah was the most reserved of all of the interviewees. At first, A made very little eye contact with me while A was speaking but warmed up after some time. A acted very similarly in the classroom setting, as well. However, A was pleasantly surprised in class upon learning that it was okay to make mistakes. About using *iel* in class, A said the following: "I'm comfortable with doing it you know like in a

group, or like, one-on-one with...a peer...But, um, speaking out loud...is still uncomfortable for me...But so far I'm comfortable with it…'cause I know...if I mess up...they can tell me, you know, 'Oh, it's supposed to be this way' and...help me out..." When students like Aliyah are assured that making mistakes in class is okay, especially surrounding gender inclusivity, students are more likely to continue to keep using these inclusive methods as they learn. In this example, rather than use the word "correct" Aliyah chooses to use the phrase "help me out." This suggests that in pointing out mistakes, the changes being suggested to Aliyah are less authoritative and more guiding. Because of this classroom setting, Aliyah feels able to rely on Dr. Kosnick and A's peers to gently point out mistakes and continue to work on the topics that A struggles with.

A second side to the normalization of making mistakes in the classroom also comes from Dr. Kosnick recognizing that the professor is an expert, but can also make mistakes as well. During an interview, Dr. Kosnick expressed that teaching often turns into learning along with the students in the class while still maintaining the role of the expert. Adding to this discussion, several students expressed that it should be the professor to lead discussions and implementation of inclusion in the classroom. One of these students, Maria, was very adamant about this. Maria has a very strong personality; M is extremely personable and always willing to share an opinion. A non-native English speaker, Maria often had a unique point of view compared to others in the class because of M's background growing up outside of the U.S. "An inclusive class would be like a teacher...doesn't judge you for who you are...it would just be a place where...the teacher has to do most of the work to make us feel inclusive. 'Cause if the teacher's the one that moves and tell everybody what he thinks about and we can open a discussion in class, other students will feel comfortable doing that as well..." For Maria, an initial assertion of authority by the

professor is helpful in motivating students to feel comfortable discussing inclusion in the classroom. However, it is important to note that Maria says the teacher "moves" and then discussion can "open." This suggests that after that initial push by the professor, students are able to facilitate these discussions with more guidance than authority. Professors are able to guide positive behavior, such as self-correction, as well as take a step back from their position as the authority figure by acknowledging times when they do not have the answers or when they make mistakes. Dr. Kosnick breaks this down in one of our interviews.

> And as the authorial voice or whatever in the classroom, a really important part is being like 'And, I also experience this, you know, social conditioning, and the ways that I think it's harmful I'm going to actively resist.'And that is a vulnerability because it means that not everything that comes out of my mouth is correct. Stuff that comes out of my mouth might be racist, and hurtful, and totally incorrect, and assumptions, and I'm actively resisting those things...But the teaching, the modeling—the modeling of, you know, 'Thank you! Thank you for telling me your pronouns!' Right. 'Oops, I made an assumption about the person in that photo that I grabbed from Google, we do that, it's a problem, there I am doing it again! Let's work on not doing that as much.'

This ties in directly with what Maria claims to be the best way to discuss inclusion in the classroom. When the professor is able to remain the expert in the room while also actively working against harmful ways of thinking and talking that they might contribute to, it is also a demonstration of the expertise that they have. In response to that, as Maria notes, students will feel more comfortable making these mistakes as well as actively checking themselves.

There was one particular example of this that happened in the classroom that stood out. Each term, all of the students in the French program prepare songs, skits, and discussions and gather at *Soirée* to share what each class has been working on. While doing my research, I was able to watch this French 101 class prepare for that event. It was a Friday, and the students and Dr. Kosnick had been working together that week to come up with a class skit where each person

would have a chance to speak and show off how far they had come that term. Dr. Kosnick had put aside time that day for everyone to practice so that each student would feel more comfortable on stage come Sunday night. All of the students and myself (I was a placeholder as there was an absence that day) had lined up at the front of the room, cramped together in between the wall on the left and the professor's desk on the right. Running through what the event would look like, Dr. Kosnick was telling the students how the class was going to be introduced at *Soirée*: "And I'll say 'Voici mes étudiants et étudiantes!'" ("Here are my students!"—using both the masculine and feminine form of students). Immediately after, Dr. Kosnick stopped and decided that phrasing it that way could be problematic and explained why to the students. With several nods from members of the class, it was decided that instead of using *étudiants/étudiantes,* Dr. Kosnick would use *mes amis* (my friends) to talk about the group as phonetically there is no difference in the masculine, feminine, or non-binary form. In doing this, Dr. Kosnick is expressing the mistake that was made, taking responsibility for it, and correcting it. This demonstrates to students that they are not the only ones who will make mistakes in the classroom surrounding French or inclusive language—even the expert in the room can and will make mistakes.

Learning écriture inclusive: The students' point of view

All of this ties directly into the importance of talking about *écriture inclusive* in the French classroom and how inclusion was discussed by these students. The French Academy questioned whether or not teaching *écriture inclusive* would be difficult for learners, and certainly adding this type of inclusion in the language classroom does come with challenges. Both *iel* and *le point milieu* have complexities that would have to be addressed by teachers.

However, for this French 101 class in particular, while students did recognize that there were difficulties and struggles in learning this aspect of the language, they also explicitly stated that these struggles did not negatively affect their learning of the language, though they might have affected how they think about language as a social tool. The following are quotations from each interviewee that shed light on how they are thinking about *écriture inclusive* and inclusion in the French classroom.

> *Sunny*
>
> I definitely...would also love to see more...discussion...with our class...if we're talking about different ways to describe yourself, like, different identifiers that people can use...that are like...inclusive and, like, a little bit more expansive than like our textbook answers...about, like LGBTQ+ identities...like...if we're focusing on like, types of people in the sense of like 'un garçon'... like describing gender or age...I feel like that would probably be a pretty comprehensive...spot to put that.
>
> *Aliyah*
>
> I think it's really important [to talk about inclusivity] because, like, it's hard at the end of the day...Plus, we are actually practicing [French] while we're doing it
>
> *Maria*
>
> 'Cause when we were discussing this in class I told Kiki that...we never thought about not including people when we [use gendered grammar], it's just how it is...I never saw it as a way of excluding. For me, it's like it's the way it is...I was like, I don't see this as exclusion, I never saw it, it's just the way it always been. And we do it on purposely, it's just the way it is. But at the same time, why it has always been like that?
>
> *Gretchen*
>
> I've never been introduced to non-binary in other languages besides English. And then, also, um, I think it's interesting because...it makes me think that there's no, like, definite word for the word *they* in other languages...So many changes can be made that will benefit the language and the people that speak it.

Jamie

> I know some people in there have already studied the language, but for people like me who've never, like, looked at French, [learning *écriture inclusive* early] it's definitely helpful, because it's, like, presented right away and you're like 'Okay, this is...a pronoun I can use in the French language. This is how it's, like, conjugated and works'...you know it right from the beginning so that you can, like, keep building on it and, like, remember how to use it just like any of the other 'normal' [pronouns].

Harlee

> Ever since I've started, like, being aware of the issue and, like, because I'm in the LGBT community [inclusive language has] always been something for me to be conscious of, but other people might not be. They just like—'Oh that's Paul. Okay, Paul's a he.' But...I'm always very conscious to, like, not include pronouns until someone states what their pronouns are. So, I think, for me, [learning *écriture inclusive*] does affect [my learning]...especially with having a professor who is, first, non-binary, and also teaching about the fact, I—I'm like, how do *they* want me to respond.

Bailey

> I just think it makes you more aware of, like, issues going. Not just, like, in the United States, it makes you more aware of the other [countries]...or languages. Because, like, I think we are definitely more focused on us and, like, you know, what's going on here. But we never really think of, like, what's going on across the world...It just made me more aware of, like, thinking of, like, how someone else lives rather than me.

Each of the students discusses something different in all of these examples. For Sunny, who was already a very strong thinker in terms of what inclusion should and could look like, thinking about ways to improve teaching *écriture inclusive* was important to S. This focus on improvements demonstrates an interest in a continued and more expansive learning of these issues. Similar to Sunny, we see that Gretchen is able not only to process the linguistic information being taught, but also to begin to synthesize it in G's understanding of general language use rather than in the classroom. Aliyah and Maria, on the other hand, who had not had

a lot of exposure to thinking about the relationship between gender and language, had a different approach. Aliyah valued the discussions surrounding inclusion more so than the actual grammatical changes being made in the language. However, A still expressed value in learning about these changes as a way to practice French. Similarly, Maria had expressed throughout our interview many times that M really enjoyed discussions around inclusion, just not in the same way as many of the other students. Because of M's background, the idea of "labeling"—through identity or through language use—did not seem useful. However, it is clear that Maria came to a point where M was able to value questioning how things were being said and the consequences of language use.

Jamie, Harlee, and Bailey were very quick to note the ways that discussions surrounding inclusion in the classroom and *écriture inclusive* did affect their learning. For Jamie, learning French at the 100 level positively affected J's ability to absorb information being presented—incorporating *iel* and *le point milieu* at this stage in the learning process made it easier to create linguistic habits. Earlier I noted how Jamie discussed struggling with some of the grammatical ideas surrounding inclusive language in French, but J also noted that J felt as though J's French was going to grow and improve. Moving on to Harlee, it became clear that H's identity within the LGBTQ+ community, causes H to feel a certain obligation to do H's best when learning new linguistic tools that apply to members within that community. Already knowledgeable about the tools available in English, this sense of obligation creates a space in the French classroom where H has to start over. Having to actively think about the relationship between gender and language while learning French for the first time encouraged H to think more critically as H was absorbing and using the information presented. In Bailey's case, these

topics never interacted with a personal identity, so that sense of obligation was not necessarily there. For B, language learning was expanded upon. While Harlee had been previously thinking about these issues in a broader sense, Bailey had previously learned a limited amount of French in a very traditional way. Bringing these issues into dialogue with language learning built upon not only B's French skills but also B's critical thinking skills in relation to the way that social problems are imbued in languages other than English.

Conclusion: The Value of Teaching *écriture inclusive*

Based on the interviews, observation, and questionnaire data that I obtained during this research, it is clear that these young French learners were able to understand, synthesize, and use *écriture inclusive* as they began learning the language. In addition to that, the students understood why and how the challenges of using *écriture inclusive* occurred because they were able to engage in open and honest conversations about these issues with an expert, Dr. Kosnick. Even the students who were not particularly interested in *écriture inclusive* still found value in their ability to practice their French while using it. I would say that this bit of information alone should quell some of the fear of the Academy.

And yet, it was demonstrated that making space for *écriture inclusive* in class did *more* than the French Academy could have expected. By having these conversations and learning *écriture inclusive* as if it were standardized, the community in the classroom flourished. I dissected earlier how the normalization of mistakes created a space of trust and vulnerability for students. While this could have occured with or without *écriture inclusive,* overwhelmingly when I spoke with students about what made them and their peers feel comfortable in the

classroom, it was the ability to share their identities, identities that are often marginalized in the classroom. In the initial questionnaire I handed out at the beginning of the term, one of the students described inclusion using a mirror as a metaphor: “I would describe inclusion as a mirror that sees everyone and does not choose who to look into it.” If we do think about inclusion as a mirror that everyone has access to, then surely it is clear that when making space for inclusion in the language classroom, not only socially, but linguistically, students are able to see their identities reflected in that community and in the language in a meaningful way.

Truthfully, the French Academy’s question has stayed with me throughout the design and research stages of this project. I worried that perhaps they were right. But the reality is that the complexities that riddle the French gender-language relationship are now being illuminated by a need to develop new linguistic moves for non-binary French speakers, and that means that classrooms are also directly interacting with this relationship. As students are constantly bringing a wider variety of identities with them into the language classroom, teachers are having to make changes that might not be standardized in order to make sure that every student is made visible. It is not an easy process, but it is not impossible, and it most certainly is a necessity.

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