

**“L’état c’est quoi?”
So, who are the French?**

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Objective

During this unit of study, students will look at the French language at different points in time as a reflection of the development of the nation. They will also consider the importance of various symbols and iconic figures representative of France and assess the message that these convey about the French national identity.

Introduction

As French teachers and French Clubs invoke symbols like the baguette and Brie, the Eiffel Tower and the beret, we know that we are at best simply scratching on the surface of French culture and identity and at worst we are guilty of propagating a simplistic, trite, stereotypical rendition of this glorious and complicated nation. Most French teachers are not French, and many have not had the benefit of an extended stay in France. How then can teachers have a profound understanding of France, let alone help students to that end? Brie and baguette can only take us so far: students are not motivated and interested by such simplistic concepts for very long. If we are not careful, such symbols rapidly become empty, risible notions for students, only useful to provide relief from the more challenging aspects of foreign language study.

Rationale

As a teacher of French, I cannot presume that my classroom is filled with students who are passionate about France and the French language. When students study French, they do so for a variety of reasons - some of which are nothing to do with feeling a need or desire to learn about another country, another culture and another language. Sometimes students are simply fulfilling the requirements to remain on a college track at high school, or obeying parental dictates. Even in higher levels of foreign language, some students continue with the class because they have discovered a natural skill with foreign language and can thereby bolster up their GPA. Students are also aware that four years of study of the same foreign language increase their possibility of acceptance to a competitive university. It is often not the stellar foreign language student in the class who has an overwhelming interest in the subject. This student is quite often a stellar student in all or most of the classes he or she takes. The teacher is thus faced with a diverse group of

students, each with their own motivation (or lack of motivation) to learn a foreign language.

The educational community is, meantime, under pressure to become increasingly responsive to the needs of industry and commerce. Along with the need for a technologically expert workforce, the modern economy increasingly requires its leaders and employees to have cultural sensitivity, language skills and the general understanding that, although English remains the world language par excellence, the worker of tomorrow will have contact with people from other countries and cultures. Many of our students will travel at some point in their lives and many will have close contacts with other countries during their working lives. They are the cultural ambassadors and the future leaders of this country. Study of foreign language must burst the bubble of isolation so that students are equipped with the skills they need to learn to understand other nations and to form their own measured judgments of other ways of being. They must realize that, even when we do not agree with other peoples' beliefs, they nevertheless may have cultural validity. They need to be in a position to judge the point at which national beliefs transgress the basic human rights of individuals and to acquire the wisdom to know how to interact with other states in the world arena. It is no longer only the people in the upper echelons of diplomacy who need to understand and interact with other cultures. This is the case for everyone including people who never travel outside the borders of the United States. They too will have an increasing need to understand other cultures as they interact with diverse colleagues with different languages, cultural perspectives and needs.

This, then, to my mind, the most challenging aspect of the language teacher's job: how to draw in more students into the class, how to entice students to take the step out of the "box" of their own culture and bring them to an understanding that other cultures have different beliefs, world visions, habits and customs and that these are important and no less valid than our own. The cultural dominance of the United States of America and the linguistic dominance of the English language can produce a comfortable feeling of superiority in American young people that isolates them from the rich tapestry of humanity. This in turn has, and will continue to have repercussions on the way America interacts with the world community through politics and trade. Other countries cannot be viewed through a lens of cultural superiority and appreciated as "cute" or "quaint" or dismissed as "barbaric" or "arrogant". Modern trade and modern politics requires a deeper understanding of other countries – be they partners or enemies. To be an effective leader in world politics, America cannot ride rough shod over nations even with good intentions and a "civilizing" mission.

Students also often arrive in class with preconceived ideas about France and the French. Views range from the French being "romantic", "sensitive" through "unfriendly", "arrogant" or even "cowards and losers". Some of these views come from perceptions of the French from movies or perhaps individual experiences and the last one

comes from superficial study of history from an American perspective and common jokes. The task for the teacher, then, is to unravel the mystery of “the French” – at least a little – and challenge ignorant value judgments and stereotypes. The larger goal is much more general: to open students’ minds to other countries and cultures and to prepare them for the demands of the multicultural, international twenty-first century.

The following sections give background information on nationalism, on France, and on the historical events that have made France the country we know today.

France and its National Identity

The problem of national identity is not just one of lack of knowledge. After all, teachers study and read about France and therefore supplement their knowledge throughout their careers. There are other greater problems. National identity is not a static phenomenon – it is in constant flux. History marches on and society and culture march on with it. Historical events may not change, but the current vision of their importance and meaning may change. Just as people at different periods of their lives may find themselves scratching their heads sometimes and wondering exactly who they are, countries are subject to the same self-questioning. Seminal events may cause changes in society and culture and the whole way a country is heading. America has certainly had to reexamine its identity in the light of the events of 11 September 2001. New trends over time – different waves of immigration, political leanings, economic up- and downturns also affect national identity.

During the fiercely contested elections of 2007, the issue of French identity was thrown into the foreground, the burning issue of the day which would have huge influence on the outcome of the elections. Victor Geisser and Gérard Noiriel¹ saw this theme as a “fabrication”, as a typical example of electoral demagoguery and a sign of the “lepenalisation des esprits” (in other words, the rise of extreme right-wing racism in France, “lepenalisation” being a reference to the extreme right wing politician Jean-Marie LePen who had seen a rise in his popularity). However, as Vincent Martigny² points out, the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy (right-wing UMP party) and Ségolène Royal (left-wing PS party) brought this issue to the fore gave voice to an issue which had evidently become important to the nation as a whole. Martigny³ points to three fears felt by the French: (1) the fear that the national identity was being diluted by Europe and by globalization and the depressed economy; (2) the fear of the effects of immigration, the melting pot and the demands of cultural diversity; (3) the difficulties of dealing with the post-colonial era guilt and repentance which have been hotly debated in the national forum. So, the French, like many other established nations, are in the process of reexamining their national identity in the face of a world undergoing ever more rapid change.

France is an interesting state in that it is both a state which has grown organically out of the mists of time and which regrouped and formed itself into a modern state after the French Revolution in 1789. Prior to this cataclysmic event, France had gradually developed from a collection of tribes to a region known to the Greeks and Romans as “Gaul” and on to a state ruled by absolute monarchs including Louis XIV who uttered the words: “L’état, c’est moi” (I am the state). The revolution changed the history of France and had profound repercussions in the rest of the world. First a republic, then an empire under Napoleon, modern France was established as the Third French Republic in 1870. From the glory days of the colonial era, through two world wars and the social upheaval of 1968, through new immigration and the establishment of the European Union.

The thematic activities suggested at the end of this unit will align well with the new emphasis on project-based learning and interpersonal and presentational communication. The new Advanced Placement exam puts great emphasis on students including their knowledge of France and francophone countries in their presentational writing. Participation in a unit of this kind can therefore be considered an excellent step towards preparing for this exam. This unit is, however, designed for use in third or fourth year French studies although it could also be used during the Advanced Placement course (generally the fifth year of foreign language study). As relatively few students go on to study for the Advanced Placement exam, I feel that the unit of study can have greater impact in the lower levels. These levels also have fewer time constraints as the Advanced Placement preparation also includes practicing for the actual exam as well as extensive and challenging course content.

Defining Nationalism

In order to study “national identity”, it is first of all necessary to have a definition of the term. For the purposes of this unit, the definition will be that used by Anthony D. Smith for whom national identity is “the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements”⁴. Smith emphasizes that new elements are added by each passing generation but the central core – for which Ernest Renan coined the term the “daily plebiscite”⁵ - is sufficiently unchanged as to allow us to talk of one nation through the ages.

Eric Hobsbawm and the modernists took the view that the nations were created by nationalistic modern political movements and are no older than the early nineteenth century⁶. Hastings and the neo-perennialists felt that this was ignoring part of the story and that a distinction must be drawn between old nations and newly created nations⁷. For the former, the first stage was a spontaneous coming together of local ethnicities with the tie of a common oral language from the fifth to the fourteenth centuries. This was

followed by the development of larger and less fluid states and literary languages. The third stage, heralded by the French Revolution, was the age of “nations created by nationalism” that was heavily influenced by the success of the English civic and parliamentary model⁸. The main source of national identity is then to be found further back in time in literature and in Christianity and the Old Testament message of “sacred nationality and kinship.”⁹ The neo-perennialist ideas about nationhood are the most useful for the purposes of this unit as they allow us to admit many older symbols of France and French identity into our consideration.

French Nationalism and French Language

Pre-revolutionary France

In the ancient world, including in France, people were bound together by observance of religious rituals into a “community of faith and worship, in the sense of community evoked by symbols and myths of ethnic origins and election, and in shared memories of ancestors and heroic deeds.”¹⁰

Michael Dietler quotes words reported by Julius Caesar and presumed to be those of Vercingetorix, the last leader of the Gauls who led the defense against the Roman legions. These were:

“A united Gaul forming a single nation
animated by the same spirit can defy the universe.”¹¹

A statue was erected by Napoleon in 1865 at Bibracte, the site of the last stand against the Romans. In 1985, French president François Mitterrand declared it a national site because the first act of French history had taken place there.¹²

To the Gauls and the Romans were added the descendants of the Germanic Franks who invaded France as Roman power was waning. Up to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the Franks dominated through the Merovingian dynasty. The nobility claimed their origins back to the fifth century Frankish king Clovis thereby creating a largely artificial ethnic division between the ruling class and the commoners. Clovis converted to Christianity and thus Frankish rule was further legitimized by sanctification from the Church.¹³ Subsequent French kings from the House of Capet defended the Catholic faith and their relationship with the Holy See helped protect their succession. The Capetian Kings’ power was underpinned by their anointment with an oil that was purported to have supernatural origins. This helps to understand the power that the visions of a peasant girl – Joan of Arc – and their subsequent invigorating power in the battle against the English in the 100 years war. It also goes a long way to explain why the Huguenot Henri of Navarre had to become a Catholic before becoming King of France in 1593 and why Louis XVI – originally intended to be part of a civil constitution

after the French Revolution in 1789 – lost his head when he refused to abandon his deep Catholic faith and ties to the Pope.¹⁴

The historian Eric Hobsbawm¹⁵ has said that: "the French language has been essential to the concept of 'France'." Celtic, Germanic and Roman influences on local dialects, the influence of the langue d'oc and the langue d'oïl, and a version of the latter's gradual establishment as a standard spoken and written language in the late 13th century – all are linked closely to the establishment of the north of France as the seat of power and to the development of the French state. Although it was only at the time of the French Revolution the use of French was imposed as the language of the republic, this development did not come out of a vacuum. Benedict Anderson describes the effects of the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" in the decline of the use of Latin in printed texts and the rise of the use of the vernacular.¹⁶ Latin reached only a small intelligentsia – a market with little room for growth – whereas the vernacular had a potentially huge market. Martin Luther became the first best-selling author as this development was further aided and abetted by the rise of Protestantism. Anderson also describes the "slow, geographically uneven, spread of particular vernaculars as instruments of administrative centralization by certain well-positioned would-be absolutist monarchs."¹⁷ French was seen for a long time as a mere corrupt form of Latin and thus faced an uphill battle to acquire enough status to become a written let alone a literary language.¹⁸ Anderson postulates that print languages became the bases for national consciousnesses in that they created unified fields of communication, connected people who were unable to understand one another's spoken vernacular but were joined by the new written language into a language community and gave a more permanent form to languages.¹⁹

To the importance of printing in creating the French nation should be added the influence of Humanist thinking in the fourteenth century and the growth of "comparative history". New studies of the past gave new historical perspectives. Under the reign of the "Sun King" Louis XIV, with its strong centralized state and flourishing of the arts, "the French had the courage to consider their own culture a valid model on a par with that of the ancients and they imposed this on the rest of Europe."²⁰ New studies of languages in the eighteenth century undermined the idea that languages like Greek, Latin and Hebrew were "sacred" and forced them to "mingle on equal ontological footing with a motley plebeian crowd of vernacular rivals."²¹ Anderson points out that French – along with other "plebeian" languages – had a new status and that the scene was set for the intellectuals of the nineteenth century and the production of mono- and bi-lingual dictionaries. The former compiled treasuries of each language and the latter indicated egalitarianism between languages.²²

The Revolution

Most of the population of France was unaware of and unaffected by these important linguistic and cultural developments. In the 1700s France was still a largely uncharted land of forests and mule tracks, a “jumble of old fiefdoms” where many dialects were spoken and few had a concept of being “French”.²³ Until as late as 1840, almost half the population of France was illiterate and more than three-quarters of the population was rural. Even in 1837 – 150 years after Louis XIV’s minister Colbert had imagined a road system to unite the kingdom - the writer Stendhal describes the landscape as one of total isolation. According to Weber, it was market forces, education, railroads and military service that helped bring the peasant population into the nation. This did not happen until the last decades of the nineteenth century. Weber’s focus was on the “grass roots” rather than political events as the cement of the French nation.²⁴ Such gradual developments are not the stuff of which myths – so important to our sense of nationhood - are born. The heady events of 1789 lend themselves to a much more glorious myth-making interpretation than do railroads and education.

The French Revolution is, for the French, the single most important event of French history – the founding myth of the French republic. William Safran considers that Frenchness prior to the French Revolution had been derived ascriptively from Gallo-Roman ancestry whereas through the Revolution it was derived functionally from “a volutary commitment to common political values and a common fate.”²⁵ He cites Dumont and describes it as a *sociocentric* definition of the nation associated with a noble vocation “the (political) instruction of mankind rather than the domination of other peoples.”²⁶ During the Third Republic, many felt that being French was to support a centralized, laic republic and celebrated Frenchness in the heroism of members of the Resistance during the Second World War. The founding myth of the French nation – with its origins in the mists of time – is contrasted with the founding myth of the French republic at the time of the French Revolution.²⁷

The French Revolution is portrayed in glorious terms of a fight of Enlightenment ideals against a strong, centralized, unjust government, a fight of the weak against the strong, the poor against the privileged. Cohen maintains that through an “historical face-lift” of the French Revolution, the French have “scripted themselves as founding fathers of the European Union” and refers to what he calls a French tendency to “achieve dominance by way of ideas created by themselves.”²⁸ Historians in the 20th century saw philosophy, untainted by self-interest, as the primary cause of the Revolution. The reality is much more complicated and Cohen claims that revolutionaries were not seeking a democratic-republican form of government, and that the fact that one subsequently transpired amounts to an “historical accident.”²⁹ He sees the French Revolution as similar to previous mass riots in France that he claims were such a frequent occurrence that they can be called a “French tradition.”³⁰ This tradition extends back to the Hundred Years’ War and the Black Death which caused the death of about 70 per cent of the French population. Cohen describes French behavior during rioting as being a “combination of violent action and localism, mixed with a sense of doing justice” and

compares it to public protests in England where the population was more educated and had more channels for political expression.³¹

For many years before the French Revolution, peasants had revolted repeatedly to protest a grinding poverty exacerbated by the unequal burden of taxes they bore. Louis XVI was considering a reform of the tax base that would have certainly reduced exemptions granted to the nobility and the Church. The Judiciary, most of whom were nobles, generally supported the King. In this issue, however, they had their own interests to defend. Ironically, Louis XVI's inclination to react to alleviate the grinding poverty of the poor can be seen as one of the reasons that he was ultimately beheaded. The Judiciary demanded that the King convene a session of the Estates General so that they could confront him on the tax issue. Without this convention of the Estates General, the French Revolution would probably never have come about.

Cohen points to the struggle between the dominant Catholic Church and the Protestant Huguenots in France as another issue at the heart of the French Revolution. In the Edict of Nantes, Henri IV granted Protestants in France permission to practice their faith and to make their voice heard in politics and public administration. Under Louis XIV, these rights were revoked in the Edict of Fontainebleau. Protestants had much to gain by supporting an overthrow of the state and many at the time felt that "the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was viewed by Protestants as an opportunity for revenge or retaliation."³²

Tax farming also contributed to the Revolution. Tax farmers were given permission by the King to collect taxes in specified areas of France. Tax farmers had close relationships with the nobility and financed lavish life styles with the fruits of their "farming." Louis XVI had shown willingness to cut his support of the tax farmers, thus, once again, unwittingly taking another step in the direction of revolution.

Strong and independent belief systems were another stress on the absolute French monarchy. Jansenists, Jesuits, Calvinists and the Enlightenment philosophers all "(rest) on the power of a concept to attract believers committed to (their) principles" and those posed a threat to the monarchy by opposing oppressive traditions and privileges.³³

Wealthy commoners of the Third Estate were meantime also pursuing their interests against the established privileges of the First and Second Estates (the Nobility and the Clergy). Rather than being interested in removing the King, they wanted to improve their status and power by demanding the right to buy titles. While aware of Enlightenment ideas and the principles of the American Revolution, these ideas were turned into "a fulcrum for unseating the nobility."³⁴

The French Revolution was thus an event that came about as a result of an outburst of various tensions and the way those tensions were dealt with rather than an expression of a

desire for democracy and liberty, equality and fraternity. The foundational myth of modern France was, according to Cohen, “invented for the most part by the French themselves beginning some *eighty years after 1789* (sic), for the purpose of bolstering France’s reputation.”³⁵

Napoleonic France

After the cataclysm of the Revolution, Napoleon I established a functioning economy and gave financial stability back to the French. It seems odd that a one-man dictatorial rule was considered the best way to proceed and was indeed considered by many a way to protect the achievements of the Revolution. However, members of the bourgeoisie had won new rights: they could now own land and had access to privileges previously only accorded to nobles and the clergy. The strong, authoritative hand of Napoleon was welcomed by many, especially as he skillfully used a system of patronage to win over potential enemies. The problem of the food supply was dealt with grain purchases and price controls, and riots were immediately put down. Added to this was Napoleon’s military prowess. Under Napoleon, the French army became the strongest army in Europe and his victories in Italy, Belgium and Germany brought back national pride³⁶. When Napoleon I had a referendum on his appointment as Consul for life, the vast majority of the French voted in favor and also gave him the right to choose his successor. Under Napoleon, the French were the leaders of Europe – militarily and culturally.

As taxes rose and the French wearied of supplying constant recruits to the army, Napoleon’s star began to fall. Military defeats to the British, Russian czar and king of Prussia sealed his fate. France was subsequently governed by representatives of the House of Bourbon – Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis-Philippe – before electing Napoleon’s nephew to power. After his capture by the Prussians, the third Republic was declared in France. This was to take France through the turmoil of two world wars and bring it into the modern era.

So, why is Napoleon I such a strong symbol for the French? Yehuda Cohen states that Napoleon’s military successes “were combined in the French mind with the Revolution, taking on mythic dimensions.”³⁷ Napoleon’s rule had brought glory to France and Napoleon – referred to affectionately by the French as the “Petit Caporal” (the Little Corporal) – had joined the panoply of French icons. His image has been immortalized in David’s famous portrait where Napoleon’s proud, conquering stance mirrors that of a Roman emperor.

Although Napoleon replaced the image of the Gallic rooster with that of a conquering eagle – a much more worthy representation for a conquering emperor – his portrait reminds me in a strange way of both birds. The “Petit Caporal’s” short stature and cocky stance are that of the “little guy” taking on the world, Vercingétorix and the Gauls taking

on the Romans, yet his imperial garb and the classic allusions in the portrait make him every inch of a conquering bird of prey.

Twentieth Century France

France lost one-fifth of men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five during the First World War but it had put up a spirited fight and emerged on the winning side. The situation after the Second World War was very different. France had been through the humiliating experience of signing an armistice with the Germans in the same rail car where the Germans had surrendered at the end of World War One. The conditions of the armistice were harsh and France had to pay to help defray the cost of German occupation on their own soil. France had not put up a real fight against the German invaders.

France needed powerful symbols to rescue its national pride and its sense of nation. Maréchal Pétain – eighty-three years old when he became Prime Minister – was a grandfatherly figure, considered a patriot after his service to France in the First World War. Pétain, with his credo of “Work, Family, State” was considered to be the leader who would be able to obtain the best terms from the Germans, and who would be able to put an end to the chaos that had ensued after the French defeat. France was split into two parts: the north was controlled by the Germans and the south was under the Vichy government. Rationing, restrictions, the loss of French colonies and the sinking of the French fleet gradually fomented discontent in Vichy France. In turn, the Vichy régime became more totalitarian³⁸ and ultimately dissolved in 1944. Pétain and Vichy are not, therefore, valid candidates to “symbol-dom”.

The French Résistance has become the symbol of the French spirit during the war – the Gallic rooster standing up against a new set of invaders. Although useful to French national spirit, Cohen points out that this group of people was initially mainly comprised of Communists who joined after Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Many of these Communists were not even French³⁹. The Résistance recruited more members after 1942 as the French reacted to the German invasion of Vichy France and became considerably more active after the Allied landing in Normandy.

De Gaulle – exiled from France and supported by Churchill in Great Britain – unified the actions of the individual cells of the French Résistance. He insisted that French troops liberate Paris in order to restore some sense of national pride, and subsequently established a government to take France forward. Difficulties ensued when de Gaulle’s recommendations for the constitution of the Fourth Republic were not accepted. He resigned only to be recalled to office to resolve the situation created by the thorny issue of the Algerian war. De Gaulle returned insisting that his plan for the constitution be adopted. The Fifth Republic was born with De Gaulle as President. De Gaulle has become another of the strong, dictatorial leaders who is symbolic of France’s greatness, his tall, angular figure part of the national myth.

Modern France: European Integration and the Melting Pot

Modern France faces the challenge of integrating into the European Union while simultaneously retaining its French identity. Yehuda Cohen comments that “the myth of the French Revolution has served (the French) well, casting themselves in the role of the agents behind a landmark event, as intellectual mentors of Western society.”⁴⁰ France, as one of the founder members of the European Union, is well placed to continue exercising what Cohen calls its “intellectual hegemony”. Exercising hegemony, however, requires maintaining a sense of a separate French identity that would appear to contradict the stated aim of the European Union becoming a cohesive new entity.

Another challenge is that of immigration. France has a policy of acculturation of new immigrants. The state actively encourages immigrants to adopt the French identity and culture. Recent immigration in France has included a high percentage of Muslim immigrants who are more reluctant to integrate into a society dominated by western and Christian values. Islam is a way of life rather than just a set of religious beliefs and this way of life is not compatible with the French vision of their national identity and their concept of France as a beacon of western civilization. This has led to feelings of marginalization amongst Muslim immigrants and hostility from the French towards this apparent threat to French identity. French society is reacting as is evidenced by a new law forbidding the wearing of anything designating religion in state schools in France and by the rise in support to the extreme right-wing party of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen. As France works through these current challenges, it is all the more important to understand how the French view themselves and France’s role western civilization and in the world.

Strategies and Activities

The following activities are designed to be engaging and to lead students to start forming their own ideas about France and the French national identity. Each activity could stand alone but, if the teacher’s intention is for students to have a more profound grasp of the issue, it is better if they are completed as a cohesive unit.

Symboles de la France

Ask students to think about symbols of the United States or their native country if non-American students are in the class.

Ask students to imagine the symbols that they feel represent France and to explain why. This may be done in French or in English depending on the linguistic ability of the students. Establish a list of the symbols proposed by the students.

Display the web site <http://web.cortland.edu/flteach/civ/symbol/symbol.htm> on the Promethean Board or using a projector. This site has audio descriptions of symbols of France and a fill-in activity that may be completed on the board by students.

Students write down the various items or figures considered to be symbols of France on a pre-prepared organizer. They then discuss whether they find any of them surprising or whether they disagree with any particular symbol.

On the web site there are also two interviews of French people talking about symbols. Students listen to the recording and write their responses to the questions asked on the site. The questions will be pre-printed underneath the organizer for the students with sufficient space for the answers.

Divide students into groups of four or five. Ask each group to discuss which symbol they think most represents France. Each group then designs and executes a poster illustrating the symbol. The poster may be drawn or painted, or use photographs and collage of other materials. It should include words and expressions with concepts key to the symbol.

The posters should be graded according to a rubric analyzing content, creativity, presentation, and accuracy of French.

Dîner historique

The teacher talks about the etiquette of French dinner parties – the way tables are set, the importance of good conversation, the courses.

Students complete the activities proposed on the website: <http://web.cortland.edu/flteach/civ/cuisin/cuisin.htm>. This will give students a good understanding of the importance of French cuisine to French life and of customs.

The teacher shows images of paintings of figures important to the history of France. These may include Vercingétorix, Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, Robespierre, Napoléon, Charles de Gaulle.

The class discusses how the artists have portrayed the figures and the message conveyed by composition of the painting. Does the composition add anything that indicates something about the subject (power, character etc). A list of paintings and websites where they can be found is included in the materials for teachers.

Divide students into groups of six. Within each group, students choose one of the figures to research and represent. Each student will research their historical figure and fill out a biographical form in French. They will then write a short speech based on the information they discovered. They will research the kind of clothes that the figure would

have word and design and make an appropriate outfit. Each group will then plan to bring simple food for a French “dinner party”. On a pre-assigned day, students will bring their speeches and food and dress in their outfits. They will sit at their table and mimic a dinner party. Each participant will present his figure and talk about his or her importance to France. Students’ biographical forms and speeches will be graded with rubrics as will the dinner party.

As an extension to the activity, the student who made the strongest presentation of each character will take part in another dinner party that will be filmed to make a lasting record of the event and one that can be shown to other classes. In my school, the movie will be shown at the International Dinner in March 2012. Pictures will also be taken of the event and made into a “historical” album that will be on display in the class. Pictures may also be displayed on a Promethean Board or on a digital photo frame to encourage students to feel proud of their achievement.

Lectures a travers les âges

The development of French language is ruled over by the Académie Française. Considered a profound part of the French culture, the language was avidly protected from the pernicious influence of foreign vernacular and only recently has started to absorb words from languages like English (the dominant language in the world economy) and Arabic (increasingly heard in France as a result of the wave of immigration from North African countries with past colonial links to France). This raises many questions. Will the French identity blur and merge with the many outside influences of modern technology and international business? How do developments in the language reflect the increasingly multicultural nature of French society? Will France lose its identity as its language is “diluted” or will a new France rise up as its language is “enriched” by external influences and affected by new electronic means of communication?

The following short readings include excerpts of novels, poems, poems, comic strips from across the ages.

Present each reading with a video excerpt or pictures to present the age represented and some comments on the differences in the French language.

Guide students through the readings.

Reading 1: Charles d’Orléans (1394-1465)

Le printemps

Associate this poem with the time of Joan of Arc (who died in 1431). Discuss changes in French – *s* between vowel and consonant has often been replaced by circumflex accent over the vowel as in *forest – forêt*; a *y* has often become an *i* – *pluye – pluie*

The poem – in modern and in old French and complete with audio recording is to be found at:

<http://www.frenchtoday.com/poem-analysis-reading/le-temps-a-laisse-son-manteau-charles-d-orleans>

Reading 2: Jean de La Fontaine (1621 – 1695)

Le Loup et l'agneau

This reading is from the time of Louis XVI. Discuss the use of fables to teach moral lessons. Discuss the fact that Jean de La Fontaine often criticized the behavior of people at the court through his fables. Discuss the form of the fable. Students should pick out words which are unusual and archaic for modern French. Note that the French here is already much more modern. The site where this poem can be accessed complete with audio is given below.

http://www.iletaitunehistoire.com/genres/fables-poesies/ecouter/le-loup-et-l-agneau-bibliidpoe_016

Reading 3: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778)

This reading is from 1762 – shortly before the French Revolution. Read an extract from livre 3. It is an example of how Rousseau felt that natural inquiry should lead to knowledge. Rather than children being taught, experiences should lead them to make conclusions. This has had a lasting effect on educational practices and shows the spirit of the Enlightenment and the philosophy underlying the French Revolution (which has come to be the “myth” of the establishment of the French Republic when cleaned of all the political vying for power and influence which also took place).

The relatively simple excerpt can be found on p. 156 to 158 in the document which can be downloaded at the following link:

http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Rousseau_jj/emile/emile.html

This shows a student working out how to find his way to food. Food is the stimulus, the master just guides the student’s reasoning until he concludes how to find himself somewhere to eat. This can, therefore, be read by students in pairs.

Reading 4: Arthur Rimbaud (1854 -1891)

Associate this reading with the 1870 war against Prussia and the general upheaval after the French Revolution – Napoleon, return of the King, Napoleon III. Rimbaud was a rebel and revolted against bourgeois society, the absurdity of life and of war. He wanted

to change the world through poetry, but only lived 37 years. The poem *Dormeur du val* expresses his impressions – at sixteen years old – of the 1870 war.

The poem may be found – complete with audio – at the link below:

<http://www.audiocite.net/livres-audio-gratuits-poesies/arthur-rimbaud-le-dormeur-du-val.html>

Reading 5: Charles de Gaulle (1890 – 1970)

This reading is the speech given by de Gaulle to call the French to resist the German occupation and to continue fighting. It was broadcast on the British Broadcasting Corporation and shows how the use of radio can serve political ends. Useful discussion can be had about the use of *Twitter* and *Facebook* in the recent Arab Spring. Charles de Gaulle uses rhetoric devices and is very fond of using three examples to make his point. The audio and written speech can be found at the link below:

<http://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/pages/l-homme/accueil/discours/pendant-la-guerre-1940-1946.php>

Reading 6: Poems written by young *banlieusards*

This brings us to modern times with the friction caused by immigration and non-assimilation of new French citizens, particularly those of the Muslim faith. Young people living in the suburbs feel increasingly alienated. These poems use *verlan* – a sort of modern slang where syllables are put in reverse order – “meuf” instead of “femme”, for instance.

Discuss this development in French and encourage students to express their views about its importance, whether it will last and what this means for the French language.

Ask students to write an email to a classmate using some of the *verlan* expressions they have learned. Look over the emails, hand back to the student and have them send them by email to their classmate. The classmate should print out the email, read and interpret it and bring it to class.

The poems can be found at the link below, along with a useful discussion of slang and *verlan* terms.

<http://seacoast.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/teci/0.htm>

Représentant français à l’Organisation des Nations Unies

During the final activity, students will bring together everything they have learned about France – symbols, language, historical figures.

Tell students that the United Nations is seeking a French representative to go on a space mission to Mars. This representative should be the best person (or symbol) to represent the essence of France, what France stands for.

Each student should choose a symbol or historical figure that they feel best represents France. Students should then research their figure.

Coach students on how to write a formal letter in French. Useful help can be found at: http://www.editionsdidier.com/files/media_file_8166.pdf

Students should then write a letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations (currently Ban Ki-moon) using an appropriate form of address at the beginning of the letter and concluding formula at the end. In the letter, students should make the best case possible for themselves (in the role of their symbol or historical figure) to be a part of the space mission. An element of humor will be introduced by the symbols (rooster, fleur-de-lys, etc) being given the same consideration as historical figures.

The letters may then be presented, bound or made into a digital presentation – or all three.

¹ cited in Martigny, Victor: Le débat autour de l'identité nationale dans la campagne présidentielle 2007: Quelle rupture? *French Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 27 No. 1, Spring 2009, p. 25

² Martigny, p. 25

³ Martigny, p. 26

⁴ Smith, Anthony D., *Nationalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 20

⁵ Smith, p. 23

⁶ Smith, p. 100

⁷ Smith, p. 104

⁸ Smith, p. 104

⁹ Smith, p. 106

¹⁰ Smith, p. 119

¹¹ Dietler, Michael, "Our Ancestors the Gauls": Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe, *American Anthropologist* 96(3) p. 584

¹² Dietler, p. 584

¹³ Dietler, p. 587

¹⁴ Cohen, Yehuda: *The French: Myths of Revolution*, Sussex Academic Press, Portland, 2011, p. 21

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, Eric

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- ¹⁶ Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, New York 2006, p. 40
- ¹⁷ Anderson, p. 40
- ¹⁸ Anderson, p. 42
- ¹⁹ Anderson, p. 44
- ²⁰ Auerbach, Erich, cited in Anderson, p. 68
- ²¹ Anderson, p. 70
- ²² Anderson, 71
- ²³ Robb, Graham, *The Discovery of France*, Norton & Company, New York, 2007
- ²⁴ Weber, Eugene, cited by Boswell, Laird, *Rethinking the Nation at the Periphery, French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Summer 2009
- ²⁵ Safran, William, *State, Nation, National Identity, and Citizenship: France as a Test Case*, *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 220
www.jstor.org/stable/1601504
- ²⁶ Dumont in Safran, William, p. 221
- ²⁷ Safran, p. 221
- ²⁸ Cohen, p. 119
- ²⁹ Cohen, p. 128
- ³⁰ Cohen, p. 34
- ³¹ Cohen, p. 33
- ³² Cohen, p. 7
- ³³ Cohen, p. 27
- ³⁴ Cohen, p. 37
- ³⁵ Cohen, p. 64
- ³⁶ Cohen, p. 80
- ³⁷ Cohen, p. 80
- ³⁸ Cohen p. 111
- ³⁹ Cohen, p. 110
- ⁴⁰ Cohen, p. 87