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Diversity, Decolonization & the French Curriculum

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Tips on Teaching French for All Genders:

- 1) Prioritize clarity and broad communicative potential. Build from the features of standard French that are inherently gender-inclusive—for women, for non-binary people, and for men. Prepare to adapt, supplement, and collaboratively critique your pedagogical materials.
- 2) Start with first-person and second-person subject pronouns. Have students refer to each other by name (not with pronouns) and model this. After building rapport, integrate third-person pronouns including at least one non-binary option right away. Teach descriptions of people using celebrities whose pronouns are known. Reconsider activities that require students to gender themselves and never put them on the spot in class without their consent. At the same time, if a student has told you their pronouns and asked you to use them, create opportunities to affirm them by doing so.
- 3) Reconsider classic textbook exercises that emphasize the gender binary. We see this often in units that introduce nationalities, professions, and personal descriptions. Teach articles and adjectives with objects first. *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* and scavenger hunt activities are great ways to practice agreements. For professions, highlight epicene words and invariable structures like *je travaille dans la finance, le commerce*, etc. I like to teach nationalities by discussing restaurants and culinary traditions. *J'adore la cuisine chinoise. Nous cherchons un restaurant mexicain. C'est un plat italien. C'est une spécialité sénégalaise.*

- 4) For descriptions of people, leverage epicene adjectives, rewordings, and middot forms with invariable pronunciation. Introduce phrases like *je suis quelqu'un d'ambitieux* or *je suis une personne douce*. Return to celebrity photos for teaching adjective agreements. Instead of classic “présentez-vous” activities, prompt students to share a photo of someone important to them and to describe this person. Exercises like this allow students to refine and demonstrate their skills without making it about their own gender.
- 5) Rely on the innate gender flexibility of most verbs. Conjugate for all genders in the singular and the plural. Emphasize dynamic verbs like *faire* and progressively incorporate more complex forms.
- 6) Be transparent with students. Point to the shortcomings of language—and the possibilities—while collaborating to address them in ways that work for you all. Give your students agency to make their own decisions about how to use language while also preparing them to negotiate the realities of the world.
- 7) In our classrooms, we are the grammar authorities and we have the opportunity to create the most affirming environment possible for our students. In order to initiate the conversations we most desperately need, we must be willing to speak, make mistakes, and learn how to correct these mistakes. This requires transparency, vulnerability, autonomy, and a sense of belonging. It requires that we check our assumptions and our privilege and that we normalize new ways of being both in and through language. By claiming agency over our grammar, we nurture greater language proficiency—both in ourselves and in our students.